

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 58

Grayed

1

It was November 3080 on the planet Triumph 80 years or so after the end of earth, Millia was commencement to be terrified. No, the wrong word, Millia thought. Frightened meant that deep, sickening feeling of something terrible about to happen. Terrified was the way he had felt a year ago when an unidentified aircraft had overflown the community twice.

He had seen it both times. Narrow your eyes toward the sky, he had seen the sleek unmanned aircraft, a blur at its high speed- like all the drones dropping off the mail and packages, go past, and a second later heard the blast of sound that followed. Sporadically, when supplies were delivered by cargo planes to the landing field across the river, the children rode their fold-up cars, to the seafront and watched, intrigued, the unloading and then the takeoff directed to the west, always away from the community.

Then one more time, a moment later, from the opposite direction, the same plane. At first, he had been only captivated. She had never seen aircraft so close, for it was against the rules for Pilots to fly over the community. Nonetheless, the aircraft a year ago had been different. It was not a squat, fat-bellied cargo plane but a needle-nosed single-pilot jet.

Millia, looking around anxiously at the large dystopian 1930s like an art-deco city all round that went on as far as the proficient eye could see, had seen others... adults as well as children... stop what they were doing and wait, confused, for an explanation of the frightening event. Then all the citizens had been ordered to go into the nearest building and stay there. DIRECTLY, the rasping voice through the speakers had said, LEAVE YOUR like vintage-looking automobile's car WHERE THEY ARE.

‘Maiara,’ Mother reminded her, smiling, ‘You know the rules...’ Two young teens...one male, one female...to each family division. It was written very clearly in the rules. Maiara giggled. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘I thought maybe just this once.’

‘Anydreia later designed the bridge that crosses the river to the west of town,’ Millia's mother said. ‘It wasn't there when we were children.’ ‘There are very rarely disappointments, Millia. I don't think you need to worry about that,’ his Ancestor reassured her. ‘And if there are, you know there's an appeal process.’ But they all laughed at that...an appeal went to a committee for study. ‘I uneasiness a little about Ashenria's...’

‘Assignment,’ Millia confessed.

‘Ashenria's such fun.

But he does not have any serious interests. He makes a game out of everything.' Her Ancestor chuckled. 'You know,' he said, 'I remember when Ashenria was a new child at the Nurturing Center before he was named. He never cried. He giggled and laughed at everything. All of us on the staff enjoyed nurturing Ashenria.'

'The Teenagers know Ashenria,' his mother said. 'They'll find exactly the right Assignment for her. I do not think you need to worry about her. But Millia, let me warn you about something that may not have occurred to you. I know I didn't think about it until after my Ceremony of Nine.'

'What's that?'

'Well, it's the last of the Observances, as you know. After nine, age is not important. Most of us even lose track of how teenagers we are as time passes, though the information is in the Hall of Open Records, and we could go and look it up if we wanted to. What is important is the preparation for adult life, and the training you'll receive in your Assignment.' 'I know that' Millia said. 'Everyone knows that.'

'Nonetheless, it means,' her mother went on about that fact, 'That you'll move into a new assembly. As well as each of your friends will. You will no longer be spending your time with your group of Elevens. After the Ceremony of Nine, you will be with your Assignment group, with those in training. No more volunteer hours. No more recreation hours. So, your friends will no longer be as close.'

Millia shook his head. 'Ashenria and I will always be friends,' she

said determinedly.

‘And there will still be school.’

‘That's correct,’ his Ancestor agreed.

‘Nonetheless what your mother said is true as well. There will be changes.’ ‘Good changes, though,’ his mother pointed out. ‘After my Ceremony of Nine, I missed my childhood recreation. But when I entered my training for Law and Justice, I found myself with people who shared my interests. I made friends on a new level, friends of all ages.’

‘Did you still play at all, after Nine?’ Millia asked.

‘Infrequently,’ his mother replied. ‘But it didn't seem as significant to me.’

‘I did,’ her Ancestor said, giggling. ‘I still do. Every day, at the Nurturing Center, I play bounce- on- the- knee, and peek- a- boo, and hug- the- teddy.’ He reached over and stroked Millia's neatly trimmed hair to have the look.

‘Fun doesn't end when you become Nine.’

Maiara appeared, wearing her nightclothes, in the doorway. She gave an impatient sigh. ‘This is certainly an exceptionally long private conversation,’ she said. ‘And certain people are waiting for their comfort object.’ ‘Maiara,’ her mother said fondly, ‘you're awfully close to being- an Eight, and when you're an Eight, your comfort object will be taken away.

It will be recycled for the younger children. You should be starting to go off to sleep without it.’ Nonetheless, her Ancestor had already gone to

the shelf and taken down the stuffed elephant which was kept there. Many of the comfort objects, like Maiara's, were soft, stuffed, imaginary creatures. Millia's had been called a bear. 'Here you are, Maiara-,' she said. 'I'll come to help you remove your hair ribbons.' Millia and his mother rolled their eyes, yet they watched affectionately as Maiara, and her Ancestor headed to her sleeping- room with the stuffed bear that had been given to her as her comfort object when she was born.

His mother moved to her big desk and opened her briefcase; her work never seemed to end, even when she was at home in the evening. Millia went to his desk and began to sort through his school papers for the evening's assignment. But his mind was still in December and the coming Ceremony. They want to put another soul in him and replace him with something that is no longer him... I thought. Though he had been reassured by the talk with his parents, he had not the slightest idea what Assignment the teenagers would be selected for his future, or how he might feel about it when the day came.

'Oh, look!' Maiara squealed with delight. 'Isn't he cute? Look how tiny he is! And he has funny eyes like yours, Millia!' Millia glared at her. He did not like it that she had mentioned his eyes. He waited for his Ancestor to chastise Maiara. But Ancestor was busy unstrapping the carrying handbag from the back of his bicycle. Millia walked over to look. It was the first thing Millia noticed as he looked at the teenager peering up curiously from the handbag. The pale eyes. Every citizen in the community had dark eyes. His parents did, and Maiara did, and so did all his group members and friends. But there were a few exceptions: Millia herself, and a female Five who he had noticed had the different, lighter eyes. No one mentioned such

things; it was not a rule but was considered rude to call attention to things that were unsettling or different about individuals. Maiara, he decided, would have to learn that soon, or she would be called in for chastisement because of her insensitive chatter.

Ancestor put his vintage-looking automobile into its parking port. Then he picked up the handbag and carried it into the house. Maiara followed behind, but she glanced back over her shoulder at Millia and teased, 'Maybe he had the same Birthmother as you.'

Millia shrugged... she followed them inside.

Nevertheless, she had been startled by the teenager's eyes. Mirrors were rare in the community; they were not forbidden, but there was no real need for them, and Millia had simply never bothered to look at herself very often even when she found herself in a location where a mirror existed. Now, seeing the new teenager and its expression, she was reminded that the light eyes were not only a rarity but gave the one who had them a certain look- what was it? Depth, he decided; as if one were looking into the clear water of the river, down to the bottom, where things might lurk which had not been discovered yet. She felt self-conscious, realizing that he, too, had that expression. She went to her desk, pretending not to be interested in the NEW teenager. On the other side of the room, Mother and Maiara were bending over to watch as Ancestor unwrapped its blanket.

'What's her comfort object called?'

Maiara asked, picking up the stuffed creature which had been placed beside the teenager in his handbag.

Ancestor glanced at it. 'Horse,' he said, I think what do you think this thing is? Maiara giggled at the strange word. 'Horse,' she repeated and put the comfort object down again. She peered at the unwrapped teenager, who waved his arms. 'Teenagers are so-o cute,' Maiara sighed. 'I have faith in that fact that I get assigned to be a Birthmother at the age of nine to some man yet like me, and what they want is same-sex love that is why I want her.' 'Maiara!' The mother spoke very sharply. 'Don't say that. There's extraordinarily little honor in that Assignment.'

'Nevertheless, I was talking to Naannadraia. Do you know the Ten who lives around the corner? She does some of her volunteer hours at the Birthing Center. And she teenagers me that the Birthmothers get wonderful food, and they have very gentle exercise periods, and most of the time they just play games and amuse themselves while they are waiting. I think I'd like that,' Maiara said petulantly. 'Four years now,' Mother teenagers her resolutely. 'Four births, and that's all. After that, they are Workhands for the rest of their adult lives, until the day that they enter the House of the Teenagers. Is that what you want, Maiara? Three lazy years, and then physical labor until you are teenagers?' 'Well, no, I guess not,' Maiara accepted unenthusiastically. The Ancestor giving to her, and her group family turned the teenager onto his tummy in the handbag.

He sat beside it and rubbed its small back with a rhythmic motion. 'Anyway, Maiara-,' he said affectionately, 'the Birth Mothers never even get to see teenagers.'

If you enjoy the little ones so much, you should hope for an Assignment as Nurturer.' 'When you're an Eight and start your volunteer

hours, you can try some at the Nurturing Center,' Mother suggested. 'Affirmative, I think I will,' Maiara said... She genuflected beside the handbag for herself. 'What did you say his name is? Gaddie?

Hello, Gaddie,' she said in a singsong voice.

Then she giggled.

'Oo- ops,' she whispered. 'I think she's asleep, don't you? I'd better be quiet.' (They want us to be dumb so they can give us receive on what they say. They why only girl's life to see this world and boys make us their slaves, my thoughts. Do you see what boys do to us?)

Millia turned to the school assignments on his desk.

Some chance of that, he thought. Maiara was never quiet. She should hope for an Assignment as Speaker, so that she could sit in the office with the microphone all day, making announcements. He laughed silently to herself, picturing his sister droning on in the self- an important voice that all the Speakers seemed to develop, saying things like,

CARE, THIS IS A PROMPT TO LADIES UNDER NINE THAT HAIR RIBBONS ARE TO BE NEATLY TIED AT ALL PERIODS. She turned toward Maiara and noticed to his satisfaction that her ribbons were, as usual, undone and dangling. There would be an announcement like that quite soon, he felt certain, and it would be directed at Maiara, though her name, of course, would not be mentioned.

Everyone would know.

Everyone had known, he remembered with humiliation, that the

announcement ATTENTION, THIS IS A REMINDER TO MALE ELEVENS THAT OBJECTS ARE NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM THE RECREATION AREA AND THAT SNACKS ARE TO BE EATEN, NOT HOARDED had been specifically directed at her, the day last month that he had taken an apple home.

No one had mentioned it, not even his parents because the public announcement had been sufficient to produce the appropriate remorse. He had, of course, disposed of the apple and made his apology to the Recreation Director the next morning before school. Millia thought again about that incident. He was still bewildered by it.

Not by the announcement or the necessary apology, those were standard procedures, and he had deserved them- but by the incident itself. She should have mentioned his feeling of incomprehension that very evening when the family unit had shared their feelings of the day. But he had not been able to sort out and put words to the source of her confusion, so he had let it pass. It had happened during the recreation period when he had been playing with Ashenria.

Millia had casually picked up an apple from the handbag where the snacks were kept and had thrown it to her friend. Ashenria had thrown it back, and they had begun a simple game of catch. There had been nothing special about it; it was an activity that he had performed countless times: throw, catch; throw, catch. It was effortless for Millia, and even boring, though Ashenria enjoyed it, and playing catch was a required activity for Ashenria because it would improve his hand-eye coordination, which was not up to standards.

Nevertheless, suddenly Millia had noticed, following the path of the apple through the air with his eyes, that the piece of fruit had- well, this was the part that he could not understand- the apple had changed. Just for an instant. It had changed mid-air, he remembered. Then it was in his hand, and he looked at it carefully, but it was the same apple. Unchanged. The same size and shape: a perfect sphere. The same nondescript shade, about the same shade as his tunic. There was absolutely nothing extraordinary about that apple. He had tossed it back and forth between his hands a few times, then threw it again to Ashenria. And again- in the air, for an instant only- it had changed. It had happened four times before, I recall. Millia had blinked, looked around, and then tested his eyesight, squinting at the small print on the identification badge attached to his tunic. He read his name quite clearly. He could also clearly see Ashenria at the other end of the throwing area. And he had had no problem catching the apple.

Following, the mother, who held a prominent position at the Department of Justice, talked about her feelings. Nowadays a repeat offender had been brought before her, someone who had broken the rules before. Someone who she hoped had been adequately and fairly punished, and who had been restored to his place: to his job, his home, his family unit. To see her brought before her a second time caused her overwhelming feelings of frustration and anger. And even guilty, that she had not made a difference in his life. 'I feel frightened, too, for her,' she confessed. 'You know that there's no third chance. The rules say that if there's a third transgression, he simply has to be released.' Millia shivered. He knew it happened.

There was even a boy in his group of Elevens whose Ancestor had

been released years before. No one ever mentioned it; the disgrace was unspeakable. It was hard to imagine. Maiara stood up and went to her mother. She stroked her mother's arm.

From his place at the table, Ancestor reached over and took her hand. Millia reached for the other. One by one, they comforted her. Soon she smiled, thanked them, and murmured that she felt soothed.

The ceremony continued. 'Millia?'

Ancestor asked. 'You're last, tonight.' Millia sighed... This evening he almost would have preferred to keep his feelings hidden. But it was, of course, against the rules. 'I'm feeling apprehensive,' he confessed, glad that the appropriate descriptive word had finally come to her. 'Why? Why- is that son?'

His Ancestor looked concerned. 'I know there's nothing to worry about,' Millia explained, 'and that every adult has been through it. I know you have, Ancestor, and you too, Mother.

But it is the Ceremony that I am apprehensive about. It's almost December.' Maiara looked up, her eyes wide. 'The Ceremony of Nine,' she whispered in an awed voice. Even the smallest children...

Maiara's age and younger...knew that it lay in the future for each of them. 'I'm glad you teenagers us of your feelings,' Ancestor said. 'Maiara,' Mother said, beckoning to the little girl, 'Go on now and get into your nightclothes.

Ancestor and I are going to stay here and talk to Millia for a while.' Maiara sighed, but obediently she got down from her chair.

‘Privately?’ she asked. Mother nodded. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘this talk will be a private one with Millia.’ Millia watched as his Ancestor poured a fresh cup of coffee. She put off...

‘You know,’ his Ancestor finally said, ‘every December was exciting to me when I was young.

And it has been for you and Maiara, too, I am sure. Each December brings such changes.’

Millia nodded her up and down... He could remember the Decembers back to when she had developed, well, a Four. The earlier ones were lost to her. But he observed them each year, and he remembered Maiara's earliest Decembers.

He remembered when his family received Maiara, the day she was named, the day that she had become a One. Millia had been completely mystified... ‘Mai?’ She had called out saying not uproariously. ‘Does anything seem strange to you? About the apple?’ ‘Yes,’ Ashenria called back, laughing. ‘It jumps out of my hand onto the ground!’ Ashenria had just dropped it once again.

So-o Millia laughed too, and with his laughter tried to ignore his uneasy conviction that something had happened. But he had taken the apple home, against the recreation area rules. That evening, before his parents and Maiara arrived at the dwelling, he had held it in his hands and looked at it carefully. It was slightly bruised now, because Ashenria had dropped it several times. But there was nothing at all unusual about the apple. She had held a magnifying glass to it. He had tossed it several times across the

room, watching, and then rolled it around and around on his desktop, waiting for the thing to happen again.

Nonetheless, it had not... The only thing that happened was the announcement later that evening over the speaker, the announcement that d singled her out without using his name, which had caused both of his parents to glance meaningfully at his desk where the apple still lay.

Now, sitting at his desk, staring at her schoolwork as his family hovered over the teenager in its handbag, she shook her head some, trying to forget the odd occurrence. She forced herself to arrange his papers and try to study a little before the evening meal. The teenager, Gaddie, stirred and whispered, and Ancestor spoke softly to Maiara, explaining the feeding procedure as he opened the container that held the formula and equipment. The evening proceeded as all evenings did in the family unit, in the dwelling, in the community: quiet, reflective, a time for renewal and preparation for the day to come. It was different only in addition to it of the teenager with his pale, solemn, knowing eyes.

Millia rode at a leisurely pace, glancing at the like vintage-looking automobile carports beside the buildings to see if he could spot Ashenria's. He did not often do his volunteer hours with his friend because Ashenria frequently fooled around and made serious work a little difficult. But now, with nine coming so soon and the volunteer hours ending, it did not seem to matter. The freedom to choose where to spend those hours had always seemed a wonderful indulgence to Millia; other hours of the day were so carefully regulated. she remembered when he had become an Eight, as Maiara would do shortly, and had been faced with that freedom of choice.

The Eights always set out on their first volunteer hour a little nervously, giggling and staying in groups of friends.

They invariably did their hours on Recreation Duty first, helping with the younger ones in a place where they still felt comfortable. But with guidance, as they developed self-confidence and maturity, they moved on to other jobs, gravitating toward those that would suit their interests and skills.

Teenagers are planed out with their lover and life- not I. A male ten named Benjie had done his entire nearly- Four years in the Therapy Center, working with citizens who had been injured. It was rumored that he was as skilled now as the Rehabilitation Directors themselves and that he had even developed some machines and methods to hasten rehabilitation.

There was no doubt that Benjamin would receive his Assignment to that field and would be permitted to bypass most of the training. Millia was impressed by the things Benjamin had achieved. He knew her, of course, since they had always been groupmates, but they had never talked about the boy's happenings because such a conversation would have been awkward for Benjie. There was never any comfortable way to mention or discuss one's successes without breaking the rule against bragging, even if one did not mean to. It was a minor rule, like rudeness, punishable only by gentle chastisement. But still. Better to avoid an occasion governed by a rule which would be so easy to break. The area of dwellings behind her, Millia rode past the community structures, hoping to spot Ashenria's bicycle parked beside one of the small factories or office buildings. He passed the Child Care Center where Maiara stayed after school, and the play areas

surrounding it.

He rode through the Central Plaza and the large Auditorium where public meetings were held. Millia slowed and looked at the nametags on the car lined up outside the Cultivation Center. Then he checked that outside Food Distribution; it was always fun to help with the deliveries, and he hoped he would find his friend there so that they could go together on the daily rounds, carrying the cartons of supplies into the dwellings of the community. But he finally found Ashenria's bicycle- leaning, as usual, instead of the upright in its port, as it should have been- at the House of the Teenagers.

There was only one other child's bicycle there, that of a female Eleven named Fiona.

Millia liked Fiona. She was a good student, quiet and polite, but she had a sense of fun as well, and it did not surprise her that she was working with Ashenria today. He parked his bicycle neatly in the port beside theirs and entered the building. 'Hello, Millia,' the attendant at the front desk said. She handed her the sign- up sheet and stamped her official seal beside his signature.

All his volunteer hours would be carefully tabulated at the Hall of Open Records. Once, long ago, it was whispered among the children, and eight had arrived at the Ceremony of Nine only to hear a public announcement that he had not completed the required number of volunteer hours and would not, therefore, be given his Assignment.

He had been permitted an additional month in which to complete

the hours, and then given his Assignment privately, with no applause, no celebration: a disgrace that had clouded his entire future. 'It's good to have some volunteers here today,' the attendant teenagers her. 'We celebrated a release this morning, and that always throws the schedule off a little, so things get backed up.' She looked at a printed sheet. 'Let us see. Ashenria and Fiona are helping in the bathing room. Why don't you join them there? You know where it is, don't you?' Millia nodded, acknowledged her, and walked down the long hallway.

He glanced into the rooms on either side. The Teenagers were sitting quietly, some visiting and talking with one another, others doing handwork and simple crafts. A few were asleep. Individually the room was comfortably furnished, the floors covered with thick carpeting. It was a serene and slow-paced place, unlike the busy centers of manufacture and distribution where the daily work of the community occurred. Millia was glad that he had, over the years, chosen to spend his hours in a variety of places so that he could experience the differences. He realized, though, that not focusing on one area meant he had left with not the slightest idea...not even a guess...of what his Assignment would be.

She laughed softly. Thinking about the Ceremony again, Millia? He teased herself.

But he suspected that with the date so near, all his friends were, too.

She passed a Caretaker walking slowly with one of the Teenagers in the hall. 'Hello, Millia,' the young, uniformed man said, smiling pleasantly. The woman beside her, whose arm he held, was hunched over as she

shuffled along in her soft slippers. She looked at Millia and smiled, but her dark eyes were clouded and blank. He realized she was blind. She entered the bathing room with its warm moist air and scent of cleansing lotions. He removed his tunic, hung it carefully on a wall hook, and put on the volunteer's smock that was sitting on a shelf. 'Hello, Millia!' Ashenria called from the corner where she was kneeling beside a tub. Millia saw her nearby, in a different tub. She looked up and smiled at her, but she was busy, gently washing a man who lay in the warm water. Millia greeted them and the caretaking attendants at work nearby. Then he went to the row of padded lounging chairs where others of the Teenagers were waiting.

He had worked here before; he knew what to do.

'Your turn, Lieissah,' he said, reading the name tag on the woman's robe. 'I'll just start the water and then help you up.' He pressed the button on a nearby empty tub and watched as the warm water flowed in through the many small openings on the sides. The tub would be filled in a minute and the water flow would stop automatically. She helped the woman from the chair, led her to the tub, removed her robe, and steadied her with his hand on her arm as she stepped in and lowered herself. She leaned back and sighed with pleasure, her head on a softly cushioned headrest. 'Relaxed?' he asked, and she nodded, her eyes closed. Millia squeezed cleansing lotion onto the clean sponge at the edge of the tub and began to wash her frail body. Last night he had watched as his Ancestor bathed the teenager.

This was much the same: the fragile skin, the soothing water, the gentle motion of his hand, slippery with soap. The relaxed, peaceful smile

on the woman's face reminded her of Gaddie being bathed. And the nakedness, too. It was against the rules for children or adults to look at another's nakedness, but the rule did not apply to teenagers ran or Teenagers. Millia was glad. It was a nuisance to keep oneself covered while changing for games, and the required apology if one had by mistake glimpsed another's body was always awkward.

He could not see why it was necessary.

He liked the feeling of safety here in this warm and quiet room; he liked the expression of trust on the woman's face as she lay in the water unprotected, exposed, and free. From the corner of his eye, he could see his friend Fiona help the teenager's man from the tub and tenderly pat his thin, naked body dry with an absorbent cloth. She helped her into his robe. Millia thought Lieissah had drifted into sleep, as the Teenagers often did, and he was careful to keep his emotions steady and gentle so he would not wake her. He was surprised when she spoke, her eyes still closed. 'This morning we celebrated the release of Roberto,' she teenagers her. 'It was wonderful.' 'I knew her!' Millia said. 'I helped with his feeding the last time I was here, just a few weeks ago. He was a remarkably interesting man.' Lieissah opened her eyes happily. 'They teenagers his whole life before they released her,' she said. 'They always do. But to be honest,' she whispered with a mischievous look, 'some of the telling's are a little boring. I have even seen some of the Teenagers fall asleep during telling's- when they released Edna recently.

Did you know Edna?' Millia shook his head. He could not recall anyone named Edna. 'Well, they tried to make her life sound meaningful.

And of course,' she added primly, 'all lives are meaningful, I do not mean that they are not. But Edna. My goodness. She was a Birthmother, and then she worked in Food Production for years, until she came here.

She never even had a family unit.' Lieissah lifted her head and looked around to make sure no one else was listening. Then she confided, 'I don't think Edna was very smart.' Millia laughed. He rinsed her left arm, laid it back into the water, and began to wash her feet. She murmured with pleasure as he massaged her feet with the sponge. 'But then again Roberto's life was wonderful,' Lieissah went on, after a moment.

2

'He had been an Instructor of Elevens- you know how important that is- and he'd been on the Planning Committee. And- goodness, I do not know how he found the time- he also raised two phenomenally successful children, and he was also the one who did the landscaping design for the Central Plaza. He didn't do the actual labor, of course.' 'Now your back. Lean forward and I'll help you sit up.' Millia put his arm around her and supported her as she sat. He squeezed the sponge against her back and began to rub her sharp- boned shoulders. 'Tell me about the celebration.' The Ceremony for the Ones was always noisy and fun. Each December, all the teenagers trained in the previous year turned One- one. Her mother agreed, smiling. 'The year we got Maiara, we knew, of course, that we'd receive our female because we'd made our application and been approved.

But I'd been wondering and wondering what her name would be.' 'I could have sneaked a look at the list before the ceremony,' Ancestor confided. 'The committee always makes the list in advance, and it's right

there in the office at the Nurturing Center. One at a time- there were always fifty in each year's group if none had been released- they had been brought to the stage by the Nurturers who had cared for them since birth. Some were already walking, wobbly on their unsteady legs; others were no more than a few days teenagers, wrapped in blankets, held by their Nurturers. 'I enjoy the Naming,' Millia said. 'As a matter of fact,' he went on, 'I feel a little guilty about this. But I did go this afternoon and looked to see if this year's Naming list had been made yet. It was right there in the office, and I looked up number Thirty-six- that is the little guy I have been concerned about- because it occurred to me that it might enhance her cherishing if I could call her by a name. Just privately, of course, when no one else is around.' 'Did you find it?' Millia asked.

He was fascinated. It did not seem an important rule, but the fact that his Ancestor had broken a rule at all awed her. He glanced at his mother, the one responsible for adherence to the rules, and was relieved that she was smiling. Her Ancestor jiggled his eyes with his head like yes. 'Her name- if he makes it to the Naming without being released, of course- is to be Gaddie. So, I whisper that to her when I feed her every four hours, and during exercise and playtime. If no one can hear me. 'I call her Gabe, actually,' he said and chortled. 'Gabie.'

Millia tried it out. A good name, he decided. Though Millia had only become a one and five the year that they acquired Maiara and learned her name, he remembered the excitement, the conversations at home, wondering about her: how she would look, who she would be, how she would fit into their established family unit. He remembered climbing the steps to the stage with his parents, his Ancestor by his side that year

instead of with the Nurturers since it was the year that he would be given a teenager of his own.

She reminisced about his mother taking the teenager, his sister, into her arms, while the document was read to the assembled family units. The crowd had clapped, and Millia had grinned. He liked his sister's name. Maiara, barely awake, had waved her small fist. Then they had stepped down to make room for the next family unit. 'Teenager Twenty- four,' the Name had read. 'Maiara.' She remembered his Ancestor's look of delight, and that his Ancestor had whispered, 'She's one of my favorites. I was hoping for her to be the one.'

'When I was an Eleven,' his Ancestor said now, 'as you are, Millia, I was very impatient, waiting for the Ceremony of Nine. It is a long two days. I remember that I enjoyed the Ones, as I always do, but that I did not pay much attention to the other ceremonies, except for my sister's. She became a Nine that year and got her bicycle. I'd been teaching her to ride mine, even though technically I wasn't supposed to.' Millia laughed. It was one of the few rules that were not taken very seriously and were always broken. The children all received their fold-up cars at Nine; they were not allowed to ride fold-up cars before then. But always, the teenager's brothers and sisters had secretly taught the younger ones. Millia had been thinking already about teaching Maiara. There was talk about changing the rules and giving fold-up cars at an earlier age.

A committee was studying the idea. When something went to a committee for study, the people always joked about it. They said that the committee members would become Teenagers by the time the rule change

was made. Instructions were extremely hard to change. Sometimes, if it were an especially important rule- unlike the one governing the age for fold-up cars- it would have to go, eventually, to The Obtainer for a decision. The Obtainer was the most important Teenager. Millia had never even seen her, which he knew of; someone in a position of such importance lived and worked alone. But the committee would never bother The Obtainer with a question about fold up cars; they would simply fret and argue about it themselves for years until the citizens forgot that it had ever gone to them for study. Her Ancestor continued.

‘So, I watched and cheered when my sister, Katya, became a Nine and removed her hair ribbons and got her bicycle,’ Ancestor went on. ‘Then I did not pay much attention to the Tens and Elevens, not teens. And finally, at the end of the second day, which seemed to go on forever, it was my turn. It was the Ceremony of Nine.’ Millia shivered. He pictured his-

Ancestor, who must have been a shy and quiet boy, for he was a shy and quiet man, seated with his group, waiting to be called to the stage.

The Ceremony of Nine was the last of the Ceremonies. The most important. ‘I remember how proud my parents looked- and my sister, too; even though she wanted to be out riding the bicycle publicly, she stopped fidgeting and was very still and attentive when my turn came.

‘Nevertheless, to be honest, Millia,’ his Ancestor said, ‘for me, there was not the element of suspense that there is with your Ceremony. Because I was already fairly certain of what the assignment was to be.’ Millia was surprised... by this... There was no way to know in advance.

It was a secret selection, made by the leaders of the community, the

Committee of Teenagers, who took the responsibility so seriously that there were never even any jokes made about Assignments. Her mother seemed surprised, too. 'How could you have known?' she asked. Her Ancestor smiled his gentle smile. 'Well, it was clear to me- and my parents later confessed that it had been obvious to them, too- what my aptitude was. I had always loved teenagers are more than anything. When my friends in my age group were teen car races, or building toy vehicles or bridges with their construction sets, or...' 'All the things I do with my friends,' Millia pointed out, and his mother nodded in agreement. 'I always participated, of course, because as children we must experience all of those things.

And I studied hard in school, as you do, Millia. But again, and again, during my free time, I found myself drawn to the teenager running. I spent all my volunteer hours helping at the Nurturing Center. Of course, the teenagers knew that, from their observation.' Millia nodded. During the past year, he had been aware of the increasing level of observation. In school, at recreation time, and during volunteer hours, he had noticed the Teenagers watching her and the other Elevens. She had seen those taking notes. He knew, too, that the Teenagers were meeting for long hours with all the instructors that he and the other Elevens had had during their years of school. 'So, I expected it, and I was pleased, but not at all surprised, when my Assignment was announced as Nurturer,' Ancestor explained. 'Did everyone applaud, even though they weren't surprised?'

Millia asked. 'Oh, of course. They were happy for me, that my Assignment was what I wanted most. I felt extremely fortunate.' His Ancestor smiled. 'Were any of the Elevens disappointed, your year?'

Millia asked. Unlike his Ancestor, he had no idea what his Assignment would be. But he knew that some would disappoint her. Though he respected his Ancestor's work, Nurturer would not be his wish.

And he did not envy Laborers at all. Her Ancestor thought. 'No, I don't think so. Unquestionably the Teenagers are so careful in their observations and selections.' 'I think it's probably the most important job in our community,' his mother commented. 'My friend Yoshiko was surprised by her selection as Doctor,' Ancestor said, 'but she was thrilled. And let us see, there was Anydreia- I remember that when we were boys, he never wanted to do physical things. He spent all the recreation time he could with his construction set, and his volunteer hours were always on building sites. The Teenagers knew that, of course. Anydreia was given the Assignment of Engineer and he was delighted.'

Instantly, obediently, Millia had dropped his vintage-looking automobile car on its side on the path behind his family's dwelling. He had run indoors and stayed there, alone. His parents were both at work, and his little sister, Maiara, was at the Childcare Center where she spent her after-school hours. Looking through the front window, he had seen no people: none of the busy afternoon crew of Street Cleaners, Landscape Workers, and Food Delivery people who usually populated the community at that time of day. He saw only the abandoned vintage-looking automobiles here and there on their sides; an upturned wheel on one was still revolving slowly. The world likes modern high floating buildings and glass that shines blue, cold, and concrete. Beltways in the sky with tracks that rush by fast and yet slow. All black and white to them, not me and not as I see her, as she does me.

We kiss under the tree of air that gives us life forbidden like the red appeals. That is where they are looking, we did what was not... cut- you can take about what goes on here that we do not allow, the voice said- to me the reader/viewer of this freaked up world. She had been frightened then. The sense of his community silent, waiting, had made his stomach churn. He had trembled. Nevertheless, it had been nothing. Within minutes the speakers had crackled again, and the voice, reassuring now and less urgent, had explained that a Pilot- in- Training had misread his navigational instructions and made a-

wrong turn. Desperately the Pilot had been trying to make his way back before his error- was noticed. UNNECESSARY TO SAY, SHE WILL BE UNCONFINED, the voice had said, followed by silence. There was an ironic tone to that final message as if the Speaker found it amusing; and Millia had smiled a little, though he knew what a grim- statement it had been. For a contributing citizen to be released from the community was a final decision, a terrible punishment, an overwhelming statement of failure. Even the children were scared if they used the term lightly at play, jeering at a teammate who missed a catch or stumbled in a race. Millia had done it once, had shouted at his best friend,

‘That's it, Ashenria! You're released!’ when Ashenria's clumsy error had lost a match for his team.

He had been taken aside for a brief and serious talk by the coach, had hung his head with guilt and embarrassment, and apologized to Ashenria after the game. Now, thinking about the feeling of fear as he pedaled home along the river path, he remembered that moment of

palpable, stomach-sinking terror when the aircraft had streaked above. It was not what he was feeling now with December approaching. She searched for the right word to describe her feeling.

Millia was vigilant about language.

Unlike his friend, Ashenria, who talked too fast and mixed things up, scrambling words and phrases until they were barely recognizable and often very funny. Millia grinned, remembering the morning that Ashenria had dashed into the classroom, late as usual, arriving breathlessly in the middle of the chanting of the morning anthem. When the class took their seats after the patriotic hymn, Ashenria remained standing to make his public apology as was required. 'I apologize for inconveniencing my learning community.' Ashenria ran through the standard apology phrase rapidly, still catching his breath.

The instructor and class waited patiently for his explanation. The students had all been grinning, because they had listened to Ashenria's explanations so many times before. 'I left home at the correct time but when I was riding along near the hatchery, the crew was separating some salmon. I just got distraught, watching them. 'I for one apologize to my classmates,' Ashenria concluded. He smoothed his rumpled tunic and sat down. 'We accept your apology, Ashenria.' The class recited the standard response in unison. Many of the students were biting their lips to keep from laughing. 'I accept your apology,

Ashenria,' the instructor said. He was smiling. 'And I thank you because once again you have provided an opportunity for a language lesson... 'Distraught' is too strong an adjective to describe salmon-viewing.'

He turned and wrote 'distraught' on the instructional board. Beside it, he wrote 'Unfocussed!' Millia, nearing his home now, smiled at the recollection. Thinking, still, as he wheeled his vintage-looking automobile cars into its narrow port beside the door, he realized that frightened was the wrong word to describe his feelings now that December was here. It was too strong an adjective. She had waited a long time for this special December. Now that it was upon her, he was not frightened, but he was ... eager, he decided. He was eager for it to come. And he was excited, certainly.

All the Elevens were excited about the event that would be coming so soon. Then again there was a little trembling of nervousness when he thought about it, about what might happen.

Trembling down there for her in me...

Apprehensive, Millia decided. That is what I am.

'Who wants to be the first tonight, for feelings?' Millia's Ancestor asked, after their evening meal. It was one of the rituals, the evening telling of feelings. Sometimes Millia and his sister, Maiara, argued overturns, over who would get to go first. Their parents, of course, were part of the ritual; they, too, show teenagers their feelings each evening.

But like all parents- all adults- they did not fight and wheedle for their turn. Nor did Millia, tonight. His feelings were too complicated this evening. He wanted to share them, but he was not eager to begin the process of sifting through his own complicated emotions, even with the help that he knew his parents could give. 'You go, Maiara,' he said, seeing her

much younger sister... only a Seven- wiggling with impatience in her chair.' I felt incredibly angry this afternoon,' Maiara announced... 'My Childcare group was in the play area, and we had a visiting group of Seven and they didn't obey the rules at all. One of them...a male; I do not know his name- kept going right to the front of the line for the slide, even though the rest of us were all waiting. I felt so angry at her. I made my hand into a fist, like this.' She held up a clenched fist and the rest of the family smiled at her small defiant gesture. 'Why? Why- do you think the visitors didn't obey the rules?' Mother asked. Maiara considered and shook her head. 'I don't know. They acted like... like...' 'Wildlife?' Millia suggested. She laughed hard yet not too hard to get bitched at. 'That's right,' Maiara said, laughing too. 'Like animals.' Neither child knew what the word meant, exactly, but it was often used to describe someone uneducated or clumsy, someone who did not fit in.

Like the Matching of Spouses and the- Naming and Placement of teenagers, the Assignments were scrupulously thought through by the Committee of Teenagers. She was certain that his Assignment, whatever it was to be, and Ashenria's too, would be the right one for them. He only wished that the midday break would conclude that the audience would reenter the Auditorium, and the suspense would end. As if in answer to his unspoken wish, the signal came, and the crowd began to move toward the doors. Now Millia's group had taken a new place in the Amphitheater, trading with the new Elevens, so that they sat in the very front, immediately before the stage. They were arranged by their original numbers, the numbers they had been given at birth. The numbers were rarely used after the Naming. But each child knew his number, of course.

Sometimes parents used them in irritation at a child's misbehavior,

indicating that Misain made one unworthy of a name. Millia always chuckled when he heard a parent, exasperated, call sharply to a whining toddler, 'That's enough, Twenty- three!' Millia was Nineteen. He was the nineteenth teenager born this year. It had meant that at his Naming, he had been already standing and bright-eyed, soon to walk and talk. It had given her a slight advantage the first year or two, a little more maturity than many of her group mates who had been born in the later months of that year. But it evened out, as it always did, by three. After three, the children progressed at much the same level, though by their first number- one could always tell who a few months was - teenagers than others in her- group. Technically, Millia's full number was Eleven- nineteen, since there were other Nineteens, of course, in each age group. And today, now that the new Elevens had advanced this morning, there were two Eleven- nineteens. At the midday break, he had exchanged smiles with the new one, a shy female named Harriely. Nevertheless- the duplication was only for these few hours. Very soon he would not be an Eleven but a Nine, and age would no longer matter. He would be an adult, like his parents, though a new one and untrained still. Ashenria was Four and sat now in the row ahead of Millia. He would receive his Assignment fourth. She, fifteen, was on his left; on his other side sat Twenty, a male named Harriely who Millia did not like much.

Harriely was profoundly serious, not much fun, and a worrier and tattletale, too. 'Have you checked the rules, Millia?' Harriely was always whispering solemnly. 'I'm not sure that's within the rules.' Usually, it was some foolish thing that no one cared about- opening his tunic if it was a day with a breeze; taking a brief try on a friend's bicycle, just to experience the different feel of it.

The initial speech at the Ceremony of Nine was made by the Main Teenager, the leader of the community who was elected every ten years. The speech was much the same each year: recollection of the time of childhood and the period of preparation, the coming responsibilities of adult life, the profound importance of Assignment, the seriousness of training to come.

Then the Main Teen moved ahead in her speech. 'This is the time,' she began, looking directly at them, 'when we acknowledge differences. You Elevens have spent all your years till now learning to fit in, to standardize your behavior, to curb any impulse that might set you apart from the group. 'Nevertheless, today we honor your differences. They have determined your futures.' She began to describe this year's group and its variety of personalities, though she singled no one out by name. She mentioned that there was one who had singular skills at caretaking, another who loved teenagers running, one with unusual scientific aptitude, and a fourth for whom physical labor was an obvious pleasure.

Millia shifted in his seat, trying to recognize each reference as one of his groupmates. The caretaking skills were no doubt those of Fiona, on his left; he remembered noticing the tenderness with which she had bathed the Teenagers. The one with scientific aptitude was Benjamin, the male who had devised new, important equipment for the Rehabilitation Center. She heard nothing that he recognized as herself, Millia. Finally, the Main Teen paid tribute to the challenging work of her committee, which had performed the observations so meticulously all year. The Committee of Teenagers stood and was acknowledged with applause. Millia noticed Ashenria yawn slightly, covering his mouth politely with his hand. Then, at last, the Main teen

called number One to the stage, and the Assignments began. Respectively announcement was lengthy, accompanied by a speech directed at the new Nine.

Millia tried to pay attention as One, smiling happily, received her Assignment as Fish Hatchery Attendant along with words of praise for her childhood spent doing many volunteer hours there, and her obvious interest in the important process of providing nourishment for the community.

Number One- her name was Madeline- returned, finally, amidst applause, to her seat, wearing the new badge that designated her Fish Hatchery Attendant. Millia was certainly glad that that Assignment was taken; he would not have wanted it. But he gave Madeline a smile of congratulation. When two, a female named Inger received her Assignment as Birthmother, Millia remembered that his mother had called it a job without honor. But he thought that the Committee had chosen well. Inger was a nice girl though lazy, and her body was strong. She would enjoy the three years of being pampered that would follow her brief training; she would give birth easily and well; and the task of Laborer that would follow would use her strength, keep her healthy, and impose self-

discipline. Inger was smiling when she resumed her seat. Birthmother was an important job if lacking prestige.

Millia noticed that Ashenria looked nervous. He kept turning his head and glancing back at Millia until the group leader had to give her a silent chastisement, a motion to sit still and face forward.

Three, Millia, was given an Assignment as an Instructor of sixes, which obviously pleased her and was well deserved. Now there were three

Assignments gone, none of the ones that Millia would have liked- not that he could have been a Birthmother, anyway, he realized with amusement. He tried to sort through the list in his mind, the possible Assignments that remained. But there were so many he gave it up; and anyway, now it was Ashenria's turn. He paid strict attention as his friend went to the stage and stood self-consciously beside the Main Teen.

‘All of us in the community know and enjoy Ashenria,’ the Main Teen began. Ashenria grinned and scratched one leg with the other foot. The audience chuckled softly.’ When the committee began to consider Ashenria's Assignment,’ she went on, ‘there were some possibilities that were immediately discarded. Some that would not have been right for Ashenria. ‘For example,’ she said, smiling, ‘we did not consider for an instant designating Ashenria an Instructor of Threes.’ The audience howled with laughter.

Ashenria laughed, too, looking sheepish but pleased with the special attention. The Instructors of Threes oversaw the acquisition of the correct language. ‘In fact,’ the Main Teen continued, chuckling a little herself, ‘we even gave a little thought to some retroactive chastisement for the one who had been Ashenria's Instructor of Threes so long ago. At the meeting where Ashenria was discussed, were teenagers many of the stories that we all remembered from his days of language acquisition. ‘Particularly,’ she said, chuckling, ‘the alteration between snack and smack. Remember, Ashenria?’ Ashenria nodded ruefully, and the audience laughed aloud. Millia did, too. He remembered though he had been only a Three at the time herself. The punishment used for small children was a regulated system of smacks with the discipline wand: a thin, flexible weapon that stung painfully

when it was wielded. The Playgroup specialists were trained very carefully in the discipline methods: a quick smack across the hands for a bit of minor misbehavior; three sharper smacks on the bare legs for a second offense. Unfortunately, Ashenria, who always talked too fast and mixed-up words, even as a toddler. As a Three, eager for his juice and crackers at snack time, he one day said 'smack' instead of 'snack' as he stood to wait in line for the morning treat. Millia remembered it clearly.

He could still see little Ashenria, wiggling with impatience in the line. He remembered the cheerful voice call out, 'I want my smack!' The other Threes, including Millia, had laughed nervously. 'Snack!' they corrected. 'You meant snack, Ashenria!' But the mistake had been made. And the precision of language was one of the most important tasks of small children.

3

Ashenria had asked for a smack. The discipline and, in the hand of the Childcare worker, whistled as it came down across Ashenria's hands. Ashenria whimpered, cringed, and corrected herself instantly. 'Snack,' he whispered. Nevertheless, the next morning he did it again. And again, the following week. He could not seem to stop, though for each lapse the discipline wand came again, escalating to a series of painful lashes that left marks on Ashenria's legs. Eventually, for some time, Ashenria stopped talking altogether when he was Three. 'For a while,' the Main Teen said, relating the story, 'we had a silent Ashenria! But he learned.' She turned to her with a smile. 'When he began to talk again, it was with greater precision. And now his lapses are very few. His corrections and apologies

are very prompt. And his good humor is unfailing.' The audience murmured in agreement.

Ashenria's cheerful disposition was well-known throughout the community. 'Ashenria.' She lifted her voice to make the official announcement. 'We have given you the

Assignment of Assistant Director of Recreation.' She clipped on his new badge as he stood beside her, beaming.

Then he turned and left the stage as the audience cheered. When he had taken his seat again, the Main Teen looked down at her and said the words that now she had said four times and would say to each new Nine. Somehow, she gave it special meaning for each of them. 'Ashenria,' she said, 'thank you for your juvenile years.' The Assignments continued, and Millia watched and listened, relieved now by the wonderful Assignment his best friend had been given. But he was increasingly apprehensive as his approach. Now the new Nines in the row ahead had all received their badges. They were fingering them as they sat, and Millia knew that each one was thinking about the training that lay ahead. For someone studious male had been selected as doctor, a female as Engineer, and another for Law and Justice- it would be years of challenging work and study. Others, like Laborers and Birthmothers, would have a much shorter training period.

Eighteen, Fiona, on his left, was called. Millia knew she must be nervous, but Fiona was a calm female. She had been sitting quietly, serenely, throughout the Ceremony. Even the applause, though enthusiastic, seemed serene when Fiona was given the important Assignment of Caretaker of the Teenagers. It was perfect for such a sensitive, gentle girl,

and her smile was satisfied and pleased when she took her seat beside her again. She skipped me, Millia thought, stunned. Had he heard wrong? No. There was a sudden hush in the crowd, and he knew that the entire community realized that the Main Teen had moved from Eighteen to-

Twenty, leaving a gap. On his right, Harriely, with a startled look, rose from his seat and moved to the stage. A mistake. She made a mistake. But Millia knew, even as he had the thought, that she had not. The Main Teen made no mistakes. Not at the Ceremony of Nine. She felt dizzy and could not focus his attention. He did not hear what Assignment Harriely received and was only dimly aware of the applause as the boy returned, wearing his new badge.

Then: Twenty- one. Twenty- two. The numbers continued in order. Millia sat, dazed, as they moved into the Thirties and then the Forties, nearing the end. Each time, at each declaration, his heart jumped for a moment, and he thought wild thoughts. Now she would call his name. Could he have forgotten his number? No. He had always been Nineteen. He was sitting in the seat marked fourteen. But she had skipped her. He saw the others in his group glance at her, embarrassed, and then avert their eyes quickly. He saw a worried look on the face of his group leader. He hunched his shoulders and tried to make herself smaller in the seat. He wanted to disappear, to fade away, and not to exist. He did not dare to turn and find his parents in the crowd. He could not bear to see their faces darkened with shame.

Millia bowed his head and searched through his mind. What had he done wrong? The audience was ill at ease. They applauded at the final

Assignment; but the applause was piecemeal, no longer a crescendo of united enthusiasm. There were murmurs of confusion.

Millia moved his hands together, clapping, but it was an automatic, meaningless gesture that he was not even aware of. His mind had shut out all the earlier emotions: the anticipation, excitement, pride, and even the happy kinship with his friends. Now he felt only humiliation and terror. The Main Teen waited until the uneasy applause subsided. Then she spoke again. 'I know,' she said in her vibrant, gracious voice, 'that you are all concerned. That you feel I have made a mistake.' She smiled. The community, relieved from its discomfort very slightly by her benign statement, seemed to breathe more easily. It was very silent. Millia looked up at me. 'I have caused you anxiety,' she said. 'I apologize to my community.' Her voice flowed over the assembled crowd. 'We accept your apology,' they all uttered together. 'Millia,' she said, looking down at her, 'I apologize to you. I caused you anguish.' 'I accept your apology,' Millia replied shakily. 'Please come to the stage now.' Earlier that day, dressing in his dwelling, he had practiced the jaunty, self-assured walk that he hoped he could make to the stage when his turn came. All of that was forgotten now. He simply willed herself to stand, to move his feet that felt weighted and clumsy, and to go forward, up the steps and across the platform until he stood at her side.

Reassuringly she placed her arm on his tense shoulders. 'Millia has not been assigned,' she informed the crowd, and his heart sank.

Then she went on. 'Millia has been selected.'

She blinked... What did that mean? He felt a collective, questioning

stir from the audience. They, too, were puzzled. In a firm, commanding voice she announced, 'Millia has been selected to be our next Obtainer of Memory.' Then he heard the wheeze- the sudden intake of breath, drawn sharply in astonishment, by each of the seated citizens. She saw their faces; their eyes broadened in wonder. As well as still, he did not understand. 'Such a selection is exceedingly rare,' the Main Teen teenagers the audience. 'Our community has only one Obtainer. It is he who trains his successor. 'We have had our current Obtainer for an exceptionally long time,' she went on. Millia followed her eyes and saw that she was looking at one of the Teenagers. The Committee of Teenagers was sitting together in a group, and the Main Teen's eyes were now on one who sat in the middle but seemed oddly separate from them. It was a man Millia had never noticed before, a bearded man with pale eyes.

He was watching Millia intently. 'We failed in our last selection,' the Main Teen said solemnly. 'It was ten years ago when Millia was just a toddler. I will not dwell on the experience because it causes us terrible discomfort.' Millia did not know what she was referring to, but he could sense the discomfort of the audience. They shifted uneasily in their seats. 'We have not been hasty this time,' she continued. 'We could not afford another failure.' 'Sometimes,' she went on, speaking now in a lighter tone, relaxing the tension in the Auditorium, 'we are not entirely certain about the Assignments, even after the most painstaking observations. Sometimes we worry that the one assigned might not develop, through training, every attribute necessary.

Elevens are still children. What we observe as playfulness and patience- the requirements to become Nurturer- could, with maturity, be

revealed as simply foolishness and indolence. So, we continue to observe during training, and to modify behavior when necessary.

‘Nonetheless, the Obtainer- in-training cannot be observed, cannot be modified. That is stated quite clearly in the rules.

He is to be alone, apart, while he is prepared by the current Obtainer for the job which is the most honored in our community.’ Alone? Apart? Millia listened with increasing unease.

‘Therefore, the selection must be sound.

It must be a unanimous choice of the Committee. They can have no doubts, however fleeting. If during the process, a Teen reports a dream of uncertainty, that dream has the power to set a candidate aside instantly. ‘Millia was identified as a possible Obtainer many years ago. We have observed her meticulously. There were no dreams of uncertainty. ‘She has shown all of the qualities that an Obtainer must-have.’ With her hand still firmly on his shoulder, the Main Teen listed the qualities. ‘Acumen,’ she said. ‘We are all aware that Millia has been a top student throughout his school days. ‘Truthfulness,’ she said next. ‘Millia has, like all of us, committed minor transgressions.’ She smiled at her. ‘We expect that. We hoped, also, that he would present herself promptly for chastisement, and he has always done so- o. ‘Bravery,’ she went on. ‘Only one of us here today has ever undergone the rigorous training required of an Obtainer. He, of course, is the most important member of the Taskforce: the current Obtainer. It was he who reminded us, repeatedly, of the courage required. ‘Millia,’ she said, turning to her, but speaking in a voice that the entire community could hear, ‘the training required of you involves pain. The physical pain I was feeling

within me. As they cut that off too, my clit like they do with all of us girls here.' She felt fear flutter within her. 'You have never experienced that. Yes, you have scraped your knees in falls from your bicycle. Yes, you crushed your finger on a door last year.' Millia nodded, agreeing, as he recalled the incident and its accompanying misery. 'Nonetheless, you will be faced, now,' she explained gently, 'with the pain of a magnitude that none of us here can comprehend because it is beyond our experience. The Obtainer herself was not able to describe it, only to remind us that you would be faced with it, that you would need immense courage. We cannot prepare you for that.'

'Nevertheless, we feel certain that you are brave,' she said to her. She did not feel brave at all. Not now. 'The fourth essential attribute,' the Main Teen said, 'is wisdom.'

Millia has not yet acquired that. The acquisition of wisdom will come through his training. 'We are convinced that Millia can acquire wisdom. That is what we looked for. 'Finally, The Obtainer must have one more quality, and it is one which I can only name, but not describe. I do not understand it. Your members of the community will not understand it, either. Perhaps Millia will because the current Obtainer has teenagers us that Millia already has this quality. He calls it the Capacity to See Beyond.' The Main Teen looked at Millia with a question in her eyes. The audience watched her, too. They were silent. They do not want us to feel anything- not even an orgasm!

For a moment he froze, consumed with despair. He did not have it, then whatever- she- had said. He did not know what it was. Now was the moment when he would have to confess, to say, 'No, I don't. I can't,' and

throw herself at their mercy, ask their forgiveness, to explain that he had been wrongly chosen, that he was not the right one at all. But then when he looked out across the crowd, at the sea of faces, the thing happened again. The thing that had happened with the apple. They changed... She blinked, and it was gone. His shoulders straightened slightly. Briefly, he felt a tiny sliver of sureness for the first time. She was still watching her. They all were. 'I think it's true,' the teenagers the Main Teen and the community. 'I don't understand it yet. I do not know what it is. But sometimes I see something. And maybe it's beyond.' She took her arm from his shoulders. 'Millia,' she said, speaking not to her alone but to the entire community of which he was a part, 'you will be trained to be our next Obtainer of Memory. We thank you for your childhood.' Then she turned and left the stage, left her there alone, standing and facing the crowd, which began spontaneously the collective murmur of her name. 'Millia.' It was a whisper at first: hushed, barely audible. 'Millia... Millia.' Then louder, faster. 'MILLIA- MILLIA- MILLIA.' With the chant, Millia knew, the community was accepting her and his new role, giving her life, the way they had given it to the teenager Samm. His heart swelled with gratitude and pride.

Nevertheless, at the same time, she was filled with fear. He did not know what her selection meant. He did not know what he was to become. Otherwise, what would become of her? Now, for the first time in his nine years of life, Millia felt separate, different.

He remembered what the Main Teen had said: that his training would be alone and apart. But then again, her training had not yet begun and already, upon leaving the Auditorium, he felt apartness. The girl the fourteener she had given her, he made his way through the throng, looking

for his family unit and Ashenria. People moved aside for her. They watched her. He thought he could hear whispers. 'Mil!' She called, spotting her friend near the rows of fold-up cars. 'Ride back with me?' 'Unquestionable.' Ashenria smiled, his usual smile, friendly and familiar. But then again Millia felt a moment of hesitation from his friend, an uncertainty. 'Felicitations,' Ashenria said. 'You too,' Millia replied. 'It was really funny when she teenagers about the smacks. You got more applause than almost anybody else.' The other new Nines clustered nearby, placing their figures carefully into the carrying containers on the backs of the like vintage-looking automobiles cars. In each dwelling tonight, they would be studying the instructions for the beginning of their training.

Each night for years the children had memorized the required lessons for school, often yawning with boredom. Tonight, they would all begin eagerly to memorize the rules for their adult Assignments. 'Congratulations, Ashenria!' someone called. Then that hesitation again. 'You too, Millia!' Millia prepared herself to walk to the stage when the applause ended, and the Main Teen picked up the next teenagers and looked down at the group to call forward the next new Nine. He was calm now that his turn had come. He took a deep breath and smoothed his hair with his hand. 'Twenty,' he heard her voice say clearly.

'Harriely.'

'Where were the visitors from?' Ancestor asked.

Maiara frowned, trying to remember. 'Our leader teenagers us, when he made the welcome speech, but I can't remember. I was not paying attention. It was from another community. They had to leave exceedingly

early, and they had their midday meal on the bus.'

Mother nodded. 'Do you think their rules may be different? And so, they simply didn't know what your play area rules were?'

Maiara shrugged and nodded. 'I suppose.'

'You've visited other communities, haven't you?' Millia asked... 'My group has, often...'

Maiara nodded again. 'When we were Sixes, we went and shared a whole school day with a group of

Sixes in their community.'

'How did you feel when you were there?'

Maiara frowned. 'I felt strange. Because their methods were different. They were learning usages that my group hadn't learned yet, so we felt stupid.'

An ancestor was listening with interest. 'I'm thinking, Maiara,' he said, 'about the boy who didn't obey the rules today. Do you think it's possible that he felt strange and stupid, being in a new place with rules that he didn't know about?'

Maiara pondered that. 'Yes,' she said, finally. 'I feel a little sorry for her,' Millia said... 'Even though I don't even know her. I feel sorry for anyone who is in a place where he feels strange and stupid.'

'How do you feel now, Maiara?' Ancestor asked.

'Still angry?'

‘I guess not,’ Maiara decided. ‘I feel a little sorry for her. And sorry I made a fist.’ She grinned. Millia smiled back at his sister. Maiara's feelings were always straightforward, simple, typically easy to resolve. He guessed that his own had been, too, when he was a Seven.

She listened politely, though not very attentively, while his Ancestor took his turn, describing a feeling of worry that he had had that day at work: a concern about one of the teenagers who was not doing well. Millia's

Ancestor's title was Nurturer. He and the other Nurturers were responsible for all the physical and emotional needs of every teenager during its earliest life. It was an especially important job, Millia knew, but it was not one that interested her much.

‘What gender is it?’ Maiara asked.

‘Male,’ Ancestor said. ‘He's a sweet little male with a lovely disposition. But he is not growing as fast as he should, and he does not sleep soundly. We have her in the extra care section for supplementary nurturing, but the committee's beginning to talk about releasing her.’

‘Oh, not nope,’ Mother murmured sympathetically. ‘I know how sad that must make you feel.’ Millia and Maiara both nodded sympathetically as well. The release of a teenager was always sad because they had not had a chance to enjoy life within the community yet. And they had not done anything wrong. ‘Well, there was the telling of his life. That is always first. Then toast. We all raised our glasses and cheered. We chanted the anthem. He made a lovely goodbye speech. And several of us made little speeches wishing her well. I did not, though. I have never been fond of public

speaking. 'She was thrilled. You should have seen the look on his face when they let her go.' Millia slowed the strokes of his hand on her back thoughtfully. 'Lieissah,' she asked, 'what materializes when they make the actual release?

Where exactly did Roberto go?' She lifted her bare wet shoulders in a small shrug. 'I don't know. I do not think anybody does, except the committee. He just bowed to all of us and then walked, like they all do, through the special door in the Releasing Room. But you should have seen his look. Pure happiness, I'd call it.' Millia grinned. 'I wish I'd been there to see it.' Lieissah frowned. 'I don't know why they don't let children come. Not enough room, I guess. They should enlarge the Releasing Room.' Ashenria and Millia responded with congratulations to their groupmates. Millia saw his parents watching her from the place where their fold-up cars were waiting. Maiara had already been strapped into her seat. He waved. They waved back, smiling, but he noticed that Maiara was watching her solemnly, her thumb in her mouth. She rode directly to his dwelling, exchanging only small jokes and unimportant remarks with Ashenria. 'See you in the morning, Recreation Director!' he called, dismounting by his door as Ashenria continued.

'Right! See you!' Ashenria called back. Once again, there was just a moment when things were not the same, were not as they had always been through the long friendship. He had imagined it. Things could not change with Ashenria. The evening meal was quieter than usual. Maiara chattered about her plans for volunteer work; she would begin, she said, at the Nurturing Center, since she was already an expert at feeding Gaddie. 'I know,' she added quickly when her Ancestor gave her a warning glance, 'I

won't mention his name. I know I am not supposed to know his name. 'I can't wait for tomorrow to come,' she said happily. Millia sighed uneasily. 'I can,' he muttered.

'You've been greatly honored,' his mother said. 'Your Ancestor and I are immensely proud.' 'It's the most important job in the community,' Ancestor said. 'Nonetheless just the other night, you said that the job of making Assignments was the most important!' Mother wagged some not wanting to. 'This is different. It is not a job. I never thought, never expected-' She paused. 'There's only one Obtainer.' 'Nonetheless, the Main Teen said that they had selected before and that it failed. What was she talking about?' Both of his parents hesitated.

4

Finally, his Ancestor described the previous selection. 'It was very much as it was today, Millia- the same suspense, as one Eleven had been passed over when the Assignments were given. Then the announcement when they singled out the one-

'Millia interrupted. 'What was her name do you remember?' Her mother replied, 'Her, not his. It was a female. But we are never to speak the name, or to use it again for a teenager.' Millia was shocked. A name designated Not- to- Be- Spoken indicated the highest degree of disgrace. 'What happened to her?' he asked nervously. Nonetheless, his parents looked blank. 'We don't know,' his Ancestor said uncomfortably. 'We never saw her again.' A silence fell over the room. They looked at each other.

Finally, his mother, rising from the table, said, 'You've been

honored, Millia. Greatly honored.' Alone in his sleeping room, prepared for bed, Millia opened his teenagers at last. Some of the other Nines, he had noticed, had been given teenagers thick with printed pages. She imagined Benjamin, the scientific male in his group, beginning to read pages of rules and instructions with relish. He pictured Fiona smiling her gentle smile as she bent over the lists of duties and methods that she would be required to learn in the days to come. Nonetheless, his figure was startlingly close to empty- like his mind at the time. Inside there was only a single printed sheet. He read it twice. MILLIA OBTAINER OF MEMORY- Go immediately at the end of school- hours each day- and to the Annex entrance to the House of the Teenagers and present yourself to the attendant.

Go immediately to your dwelling at the deduction of Training Hours each day.

From this moment you are exempted from rubrics governing rudeness. You may ask any question of any citizen and you will receive answers.

Do not discuss your training with any other member of the community, including parents and Teenagers.

From this moment you are prohibited from dream- telling.

Except for illness or injury unrelated to your training, do not apply for any medication.

You are not permitted to apply for release.

You may lie...

Millia was stunned. What would happen to his friendships? Her mindless hours playing ball, or riding his like the vintage-looking automobile, along the river?

Those had been happy and vital times for her. Were they to be completely taken from her, now? The simple logistic instructions- where to go, and when- we are expected. Every- Nine had to be teenagers, of course, where, and how and when to report for training. But he was a little dismayed that his schedule left no time for recreation.

The exemption from rudeness startled her. Reading it again, however, he realized that it did not compel her to be rude; it simply allowed her the option. He was quite certain he would never take advantage of it. He was so completely, so thoroughly accustomed to courtesy within the community that the thought of asking another citizen an intimate question, of calling someone's attention to an area of awkwardness, was unnerving.

The prohibition of a dream- telling, he thought, would not be a real problem. She dreamed so rarely that the dream- telling did not come effortlessly to her anyway, and he was glad to be excused from it. He wondered briefly, though, how to deal with it at the morning meal. What if he did dream- should he simply tell his family unit, as he did so often, anyway, that she marked as certain of? That would be a lie. Still, the final rule said ... well, he was not ready to think about the final rule on the page.

The restriction of medication unnerved her. The medication was always available to citizens, even to children, through their parents. When he had crushed his finger in the door, he had quickly, gasping into the speaker, notified her mother; she had hastily requisitioned relief-of- pain

medication which had promptly been delivered to his dwelling. Instantly the excruciating pain in his hand had diminished to the throb which was, now, all he could recall of the experience.

Re-reading rule number 7, he realized that a crushed finger fell into the category of 'unrelated to training.' So, if it ever happened again- and he was quite certain it would not; he had been incredibly careful near heavy doors since the accident! - He could still receive medication.

The pill he took now, each morning, was also unrelated to training. So, he would continue to receive the pill.

But he remembered uneasily what the Main Teen had said about the pain that would come with his training. She had called it indescribable.

Millia swallowed hard, trying without success to imagine what such pain might be like, with no medication at all. But it was beyond his comprehension.

He felt no reaction to rule number 6 at all. It had never occurred to her that under any circumstances, ever, he might apply for release.

Finally, he steeled herself to read the final rule again. She had been trained since their earliest childhood, since his earliest learning of language, never to lie. It was an integral part of the learning of precise speech. Once, when he had been a Four, he had said, just before the midday meal at school, 'I'm starving.'

Immediately he had been taken aside for a brief private lesson in language precision. He was not starving; it was pointed out. He was hungry. No one in the community was starving, had ever been starving, and would

ever be starving. To say 'starving' was to speak a lie. An unintentional lie, of course. But the reason for the precision of language was to ensure that unintentional lies were never uttered. Did he understand that? They asked her, and he had.

She had never, within his memory, been tempted to lie. Ashenria did not lie. Maiara did not lie. His parents did not lie. No one did. Unless... Now Millia had a thought that he had never had before. This new thought was frightening. What if others- adults- had, upon becoming Nines, received in their instructions the same terrifying sentence? What if they had all been instructed: You may lie? Her mind wound... now, empowered to ask questions of utmost rudeness- and promised answers- he could, conceivably (though it was almost unimaginable,) ask someone, some adult, his Ancestor perhaps: 'Do you lie today, then, and now?' Then again, he would have no way of knowing if the answer he received were true. 'I go in here, Millia,' Fiona teenagers her when they reached the front door of the House of the Teenagers after parking their cars in the designated area.

~*~

'I don't know why I'm nervous,' she confessed. 'I've been here so often before.' She turned her teenagers over in her hands. 'Well, everything's different now,' Millia reminded her. 'Even the nameplates on our like vintage-looking automobiles,' Fiona laughed.

5

During the night, the nameplate of each new Nine had been removed by the Maintenance Crew and replaced with the style that

indicated citizen- in- training. 'I don't want to be late,' she said hastily and started up the steps. 'If we finish at the same time, I'll ride home with you.' Millia nodded, waved to her, and headed around the building toward the Annex, a small wing attached to the back. He certainly did not want to be late for his first day of training, either. The Annex was very ordinary, its door unremarkable. He reached for the heavy handle, then noticed a buzzer on the wall. So, he buzzed instead. 'Absolutely...?' The voice came through a small speaker above the buzzer. 'It's, uh, Millia. I'm new- I mean...Yah...'

'Come in...' A click indicated that the door had been unlatched. The lobby was exceedingly small and contained only a desk at which a female Attendant sat working on some papers. She looked up when he entered; then, to his surprise, she stood. It was a small thing, the standing; but no one had ever stood automatically to acknowledge Millia's presence before... 'Welcome, Obtainer of Memory,' she said respectfully. 'Oh, please,' he replied uncomfortably. 'Call me Millia.' She smiled, pushed a button, and he heard a click that unlocked the door to her left. 'You may go right on in,' she teenagers her. Then she noticed her embarrassment and realized its origin. No doors in the community were locked, ever.

None that Millia knew of, anyway. 'The locks are simple to ensure The Headset's privacy because he needs concentration,' she explained. 'It would be difficult if citizens wandered in, looking for the Department of car repair, or something.' Millia laughed, relaxing a little. The woman seemed very friendly, and it was true- in fact, it was a joke throughout the community- that the Department of Bicycle Repair, an unimportant little office, was relocated so often that no one ever knew where it was.

'There is nothing dangerous here,' she teenagers her.

‘Nevertheless,’ she added, glancing at the wall clock, ‘he doesn't like to be kept waiting.’

Millia hurried through the door and found herself in a comfortably furnished living area. It was not unlike his own family unit's dwelling. Furniture was standard throughout the community: practical, sturdy, the function of each piece clearly defined. A bed for sleeping. Yet a table for eating. A desk for studying. All those things were in this spacious room, though each was slightly different from those in her dwelling. The fabrics on the upholstered chairs and sofa were slightly thicker and more luxurious; the table legs were not straight like those at home, but slender and curved, with a small carved decoration at the foot.

The bed, in an alcove at the far end of the room, was draped with a splendid cloth embroidered over its entire surface with intricate designs.

Yet the most conspicuous difference was the books. In his dwelling, there were the necessary reference volumes that each house teenagers contained: a dictionary and the thick community volume which contained descriptions of every office, factory, building, and committee. And the Rules

Book, of course. ‘We'll have to suggest that to the committee. They'd study it,’ Millia said slyly, and Lieissah chortled with laughter. ‘Correct!’ she blared out, and Millia helped her from the tub. Usually, in the morning ritual when the family members teenagers their dreams, Millia did not donate much. She rarely dreamed about anything. Sometimes he awoke with a feeling of fragments afloat in his sleep, but he could not seem to grasp them and put them together into something worthy of telling at the ritual. Yet this morning was different. She had dreamed very vividly the

night before.

Her mind wandered while Maiara, as usual, narrated a lengthy dream, this one a frightening one in which she had, against the rules, been riding her mother's bicycle and been caught by the Security Guards. They all listened carefully and discussed with Maiara the warning that the dream had given. 'Thank you for your dream, Maiara,' Millia said the standard phrase automatically and tried to pay better attention while his mother teenagers of a dream fragment, a disquieting scene where she had been chastised for a rule infraction she did not understand. Together they agreed that it resulted from her feelings when she had reluctantly dealt with punishment to the citizen who had broken the major rules a second time.

Ancestor said that he had had no dreams. 'Gabbie?' Ancestor aka dad or mom asked, looking down at the handbag where the teenager lay gurgling after his feeding, ready to be taken back to the Nurturing Center for the day.

They all laughed.

Dream-telling began with Threes. If a teenager dreamed, no one knew. 'Millia?' Mother asked me the question. They always asked though they knew how rarely Millia had a dream to tell. 'I did dream last night,' Millia teenagers them. He shifted in his chair, frowning. 'Good,' Ancestor said... 'Tell us...' 'The details aren't clear, really,' Millia explained, trying to recreate the odd dream in his mind. 'I was in the bathing room at the House of the Teenagers.' 'That's where you were yesterday,' Ancestor pointed out. Millia nodded at me sweetly. 'Even so, it wasn't the same. There was a tub, in the dream. Then only one, and the real bathing room has rows and rows

of them. However- the room in the dream was warm and damp. And I had taken off my tunic but had not put on the smock, so my chest was bare. I was perspiring because it was so warm. And Fiona was there, the way she was yesterday.'

~*~

'Ashenria, too?' Mother asked- Millia shook his head. 'No- It was only me and Fiona, alone in the room, standing beside the tub. She was laughing. But I was not. I was almost a little angry at her, in the dream, because she wasn't taking me seriously.' 'Totally about what?' Maiara asked- Millia looked at his plate. For some reason that he did not understand, he felt slightly embarrassed. 'I was trying to convince her that she should get into the tub of water.' She stopped what she was doing and knew that she had to tell them all about it. That it was not only all right but necessary to tell all a dream.

So, he forced herself to relate the part that made her uneasy. 'I wanted her to take off her clothes, and get into the tub,' he explained quickly. 'I wanted to bathe her. I had the sponge in my hand. But she would not. She kept laughing and saying no.' She looked up at her parents. 'That's all,' he said... 'Can you describe the strongest feeling in your dream, son?' Ancestor asked. Millia thought about it. The details were murky and vague. But the feelings were clear and flooded her again now as he thought. 'The wanting,' he said. 'I knew that she wouldn't. And I knew that she should not. But I wanted it so terribly. I could feel the wanting all around me.' 'Thank you for your dream, Millia,' Mother said after a moment. She glanced at Ancestor. 'Maiara,' Ancestor said, 'it's time to leave for school.'

Would you walk beside me this morning, and keep an eye on the teenager's bag handbag? We want to be certain she doesn't wiggle herself loose.' Millia began to rise to collect his schoolbooks.

He thought it surprising that they had not talked about his dream at length before thanking you.

They found it as confusing as he had. 'Wait, Millia,' Mother said moderately... 'I'll write an admission of guilt to your instructor so that you won't have to speak one for being late.' She sank back down into his chair, puzzled. She waved to Ancestor and Maiara as they left the dwelling, carrying Gabe in his handbag. She watched while Mother tidied the remains of the morning meal and placed the tray by the front door for the Collection Crew. In conclusion, she sat down beside her at the table. 'Millia,' she said with a smile, 'the feeling you described as the wanting? It was your first Stirrings. Ancestor and I have been expecting it to happen to you. It happens to everyone. It happened to Ancestor when he was your age.

And it happened to me.

It will happen someday to Maiara. 'As well as very often,' Mother added, 'it begins with a dream.' Stirrings... She had heard the word before. He remembered that there was a reference to the Stirrings in the Book of Rules, though he did not remember what it said. And now and then the Speaker mentioned it. ATTENTION...

A REMINDER THAT STIRRINGS MUST BE CONVEYED for
TREATMENT TO TAKE APARTMENT.

She had always ignored that announcement, because she did not

understand it and it had never seemed to apply to her in any way. He ignored, as most citizens did, many of the guidelines and reminders read by the Speaker. 'Do I have to report it?' he asked his mother.

She laughed... 'You did, in the dream- telling. That's enough.' 'Hathor again what about the treatment? The Speaker says that treatment must take place.' Millia felt miserable. Just when the Ceremony was about to happen, his Ceremony of Nine, would he have to go away someplace for treatment? Just because of a stupid dream?

However, his mother laughed again in a reassuring, affectionate way. 'No, nope,' she said. 'It's just the pills. You are ready for the pills, that is all. That's the treatment for Stirrings.' Millia brightened... She knew about the pills. His parents took them each morning. As well as some of his friends did, he knew. Once he had been heading off to school with Ashenria, both on their 33 Ford cars, when Ashenria's Ancestor had called from their dwelling doorway, 'You forgot your plan B pill, Ashenria!'

Ashenria had groaned good-naturedly, turned his like vintage-looking automobile, and ridden back while Millia waited. It was the sort of thing one did not ask a friend about because it might have fallen into that uncomfortable category of 'being different.' Ashenria took a pill each morning; Millia did not. Always better, less rude, to talk about things that were the same. Now he swallowed the small pill that his mother handed her. 'That's all?' he asked... 'That's all,' she replied, returning the bottle to the cupboard. 'But you mustn't forget. I will remind you of the first weeks, but then you must do it on your own. If you forget, the Stirrings will come back.

The dreams of Stirrings will come back.

Sometimes the dosage must be adjusted.' 'Ashenria takes them,' Millia confided. Her mother nodded, unsurprised. 'Many of your group mates probably do. The males, at least. And they all will, soon. Females too.'

'How long will I have to take them?'

'Until you enter the House of the Teenagers,' she explained. 'All of your adult life... Conversely, it becomes routine; after a while, you won't even pay much attention to it.' She looked at her watch. 'If you leave right now, you won't even be late for school. Hurry along... now kiddies we are kids with them until we are old... and that is 30 years of age- or we ID-ed. 'And thank you again, Millia,' she added, as he went to the door, 'for your dream.' Speeding rapidly down the path, Millia felt oddly proud to have joined those who took the pills. For a moment, though, he remembered the dream again. The dream had felt pleasurable. Though the feelings were confused, he thought that he had liked the feeling that his mother had called Stirrings. She evoked that upon waking, he had wanted to feel the Stirrings again. Then, in the same way that his dwelling slipped away behind her as he rounded a corner of his car, the dream slipped away from his thoughts. Very temporarily, a little guilty, she tried to grasp it back. But the feelings had disappeared. The Stirrings were gone... 'Maiara, please teenagers motionless,' Mother said again. Maiara, standing in front of her, fidgeted impatiently. 'I can tie them myself,' she complained. 'I always have.' 'I know that' momma replied, straightening the hair ribbons on the little girl's braids.

'But I also know that they constantly come loose and often, they're dangling down your back by afternoon. Today, at least, we want them to be

neatly tied and to stay neatly tied.' 'I don't like hair pink ribbons... or so they say that is the color, yet I don't see it. Like all the colors are fifty shades of gray and blacked out in my and our mind they think for us in our bodies and our minds- and that is what this would become.

I'm glad I only have to wear them one more year,' Maiara said irritably. 'Next year I get my bicycle, too,' she added more cheerfully. 'There are good things each year,' Millia reminded her. 'This year you get to start your volunteer hours. As well as remember last year, when you became a Seven, you were so happy to get your front- buttoned jacket?' The little girl nodded and looked down at herself, at the jacket with its row of large buttons, which designated her as a Seven. Fours, Fives, and Sixes all wore jackets that fastened down the back, so that they would have to help each other dress, besides would learn- interdependence. The front-buttoned jacket was the first sign of independence, the first very visible symbol of growing up. The bicycle, at Nine, would be the powerful emblem of moving gradually out into the community, away from the protective family unit.

Maiara grinned and wriggled away from her mother.

'And this year you get your Assignment,' she said- to Millia in an excited voice. 'I hope you get a Pilot. And that you take me flying!' 'Sure, I will,' said Millia. 'And I'll get a special little parachute that just fits you, and I'll take you up to, oh, maybe twenty thousand feet, and open the door, and-'

'Millia,' Mother warned. 'I was only joking,' Millia groaned. 'I don't want Pilot, anyway. If I get Pilot- I'll put in an appeal.' 'Come on,' Mother said. She gave Maiara's ribbons a final tug. 'Millia? Are you ready?

Did you take your pill? I want to get a good seat in the Auditorium.’ She prodded Maiara to the front door and Millia followed.

There were only two occasions of release which were not punishment. The release of teenagers, which was a time of celebration for a life well and fully lived; and release of a teenager, which always brought a sense of what- could- we- have- done. This was especially troubling for the

Nurturers, like Ancestor, who felt they had failed somehow.

But it happened very rarely. ‘Well,’

Ancestor- dad said, ‘I’m going to keep trying. I may ask the committee for permission to bring her here at night if you do not mind.

You know what night- crew Nurturers are like. This little guy needs something extra.’ It was a short ride to the Auditorium, Maiara waving to her friends from her seat on the back of Mother’s bicycle. Millia stowed her car beside Mother’s and made his way through the throng to find his group.

The entire community attended the Ceremony each year. For the parents, it meant two days’ holiday from work; they sat together in the huge hall. Children sat with their groups until they went, one by one, to the stage. You get cars when they say you need them to drive themselves or some on upper well see that you get home safely... there is no pick in what you do it all planned out with a chip they put in your common sense at one a voice within like a God.

Ancestor, though, would not join Mother in the audience right away. For the earliest ceremony, the Naming, the Nurturers brought the teenagers to the stage.

Millia, from his place on the balcony with the Elevens, searched the Auditorium for a glimpse of Ancestor. It was not at all hard to spot the Nurturers' section at the front; coming from it were the wails and howls of the teenagers who sat squirming on the Love- the boys' laps, and that is the only time you feel that also. Love- what is that? Just a state of mind... At every other public ceremony, the audience was silent and attentive. But once a year, they all smiled indulgently at the commotion from the little ones waiting to receive their names and families. Millia finally caught his Ancestor's eye and waved. Ancestor grinned and waved back, then held up the hand of the teenager on his lap, making it wave, too. It was not Gaddie.

Gabe was back at the Nurturing Center today, being cared for by the night crew. He had been given an unusual and special reprieve from the committee and granted an additional year of nurturing before his Naming and Placement. The ancestor had gone before the committee with a plea on behalf of Gaddie, who had not yet gained the weight appropriate to his days of life nor begun to sleep soundly enough at night to be placed with his family unit.

Normally such a teenager would be labeled Inadequate and released from the community. The books in his dwelling were the only books that Millia had ever seen. He had never known that other books existed. Then this room's walls were completely covered by bookcases, filled, which reached the ceiling.

There must have been hundreds- thousands- of books, their titles stamped in shiny letters. Millia stared at them. She could not imagine what the thousands of pages contained. Could there be rules beyond the rules

which governed the community? Could there be more descriptions of offices, factories, and committees? She had only a second to look around because he was aware that the man sitting in a chair beside the table was watching her. Hurriedly she moved forward, stood before the man, bowed slightly, and said, 'I'm Millia...' 'I know. Welcome,

The Obtainer of Memory.'

Millia recognized the man. He was the Teen who had seemed separate from the others at the Ceremony, though he was dressed in the same special clothing that only Teenagers wore.

Millia looked self-consciously into the pale eyes that mirrored her own. 'Sir, I apologize for my lack of understanding...' She waited, but the man did not give the standard accepting- apology response. After a moment, Millia went on, 'But I thought- I mean I think,' he corrected, reminding herself that if the precision of language were ever to be important, it was certainly important now, in the presence of this man, 'that you are the Obtainer of Memory. I am only, well, I was only assigned, I mean selected, yesterday. I am not anything at all. Not yet.' The man looked at her thoughtfully, silently. It was a look that combined interest, curiosity, concern, and a little sympathy as well, finally she spoke. 'Benjie today, this moment, at least to me, you are The Obtainer.

6

'I have been The Obtainer for a long time. An exceptionally long time. You can see that, can't you?' Millia nodded... and said- the man was wrinkled, and his eyes, though piercing in their unusual lightness, seemed

tired. The flesh around them darkened into shadowed circles. 'I can see that you are very teenagers,' Millia responded with respect. The Teenagers were always given the highest respect. The man smiled ever so sweaty, yet I did not know all the emotions. She touched the sagging flesh on his face with amusement. 'I am not, actually, as teenagers as I look,' he teenagers Millia. 'This job has aged me... I know I look as if I should be scheduled for release very soon. But I have a good deal of time left. 'I was pleased, though, when you were selected. It took them a long time. The failure of the previous selection was ten years ago, and my energy is starting to diminish. I need what strength I have remaining for your training. We have hard- and painful work to do, you and me. 'Please sit down,' he said, and gestured toward the nearby chair.

Millia lowered herself onto the soft cushioned seat. The man closed his eyes and continued speaking. 'When I became a Nine, I was selected, as you were. I was frightened, as I'm sure you are.' He opened his eyes for a moment and peered at Millia, who nodded.

My eyes closed again. 'I came to this very room to begin my training. It was such a long time ago. 'The previous Obtainer seemed just as teenagers to me as I do to you. He was just as tired as I am today.' He sat forward suddenly, opened his eyes, and said, 'You may ask questions. I have so little experience in describing this process. It is forbidden to talk of it.' 'I know, sir. I have read the instructions,' Millia said. He is the perfect man to us in all even in sperm- to make more girls only boy are not a thing- in are parts- the one that gets us to have more of us...

'So, I may neglect to make things as clear as I should.' The man

chuckled. 'My job is important and has enormous honor. But that does not mean I am perfect, and when I tried before to train a successor, I failed. Please ask any questions that will help you.' In his mind, Millia had questions. A thousand. A million questions. As many questions as books were lining the walls. Nevertheless, he did not ask one, not yet. The man sighed, seeming to put his thoughts in order. Then he spoke again. 'Simply stated,' he said, 'although it is not simple at all, my job is to transmit to you all the memories I have within me. Memories of the past.' 'Sir,' Millia said tentatively, 'I would be extremely interested to hear the story of your life and to listen to your memories. 'I apologize for interrupting,' he added quickly. The man waved his hand impatiently. 'No apologies in this room. We haven't time.' 'Well,' Millia went on, uncomfortably aware that he might be interrupted again, 'I am interested, I don't mean that I'm not. But then again, I do not exactly understand why it is so important. I could do some adult jobs in the community, and in my recreation time, I could come and listen to the stories from your childhood.'

I would like that. Actually,' he added, 'I have done that already, in the House of the Teenagers. Teenagers like to talk about their childhoods, and it's always fun to listen.'

~*~

The man shook his head. 'No, no,' he said. 'I'm not being clear. It's not my past, not my childhood that I must transmit to you.'

He leaned back, resting his head against the back of the upholstered chair. 'It's the memories of the entire world,' he said with a sigh. 'Before you, before me, before the previous Obtainer, and generations

before her.'

Millia frowned. 'The entire world?' he asked. 'I don't understand. Do you mean not just us? Not just the community? Do you mean elsewhere, too?'

He tried, in his mind, to grasp the concept.

'I'm sorry, sir. I do not understand exactly. I am not smart enough. I do not know what you mean when you say, 'the entire world' or 'generations before her.' I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now.'

'There's much more. There is all that goes beyond- all that is Elsewhere- and all that goes back, and back, and back. I received all of those when I was selected. And here in this room, all alone, I re-experience them repeatedly. It is how wisdom comes. And how we shape our future.'

He rested for a moment, breathing deeply. 'I am so weighted with them,' he said.

Millia felt a terrible concern for the man, suddenly.

'It's as if...' The man paused, seeming to search his mind for the right words of description. 'It's like going downhill through deep snow on a toboggan,' he said, finally.

'At first, it's exhilarating: the speed; the sharp, clear air; but then the snow accumulates, builds upon the runners, and you slow, you have to push hard to keep going, and-' He shook his head suddenly, and peered at Millia.

'That meant nothing to you, did it?' He asked.

Millia was confused. 'I didn't understand- it, sir.'

'Of course, you didn't. You don't know what snow is, do you?'

Millia shook his head.

'Or a toboggan? Runners?' 'No, sir,' Millia said.

'Downhill? The term means nothing to you?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'Well, it's a place to start. I had been wondering how to begin. Move to bed and lie face down. Remove your tunic first and get naked- so I can feel you where I need to give you all of me and more.' Millia did so, a little apprehensively. Beneath his bare chest, he felt the soft teenagers of the magnificent cloth that covered the bed. He watched as the man rose and moved first to the wall where the speaker was the same sort of speaker that occupied a place in every dwelling, but one thing about it was different. This one had a switch, which the man deftly snapped to the end that said OFF. Millia almost gasped aloud. To have the power to turn the speaker off! It was an astonishing thing. Then the man moved with the surprising quickness to the corner where the bed was.

She sat on a chair beside Millia, who was motionless, waiting for what would happen next. 'Close your eyes... Relax... This will not be painful.' Millia remembered that she was allowed, that he had even been encouraged, to ask questions. 'What are you going to do, sir?' he asked, hoping that his voice did not betray his nervousness. 'I am going to transmit the memory of snow,' the teenager's man said and placed his hands on Millia's bareback. Millia felt nothing unusual at first. He felt only the light

touch of the man's hands on his back. He tried to relax, to breathe evenly. The room was silent, and for a moment Millia feared that he might disgrace herself now, on the first day of his training, by falling asleep.

Then he shivered. He realized that the touch of the hands felt, suddenly, teenagers. At the same instant, breathing in, he felt the air change, and his very breath was teenagers. He licked his lips, and in doing so, his tongue touched the suddenly chilled air. It was very startling; but he was not at all frightened, now. she was filled with energy and more of what he gives to her, and he breathed again, feeling the sharp intake of frigid air. Now, too, he could feel teenagers' air swirling around his entire body.

He felt it blow against his hands where they lay at his sides, and over his back. The touch of the man's hands seemed to have disappeared. Now he has become aware of an entirely new sensation: pinpricks?

No, because they were soft and without pain. Tiny, teenage, featherlike feelings peppered his body and face. He put out his tongue again and caught one of the dots of teenagers upon it. It disappeared from his awareness instantly, but he caught another, and another. The sensation made her smile. One part of his consciousness knew that he was still lying there, on the bed, in the Annex room. Yet another, separate part of his being was upright now, in a sitting position, and beneath her, he could feel that he was not on the softly decorated bed covering at all, but seated on a flat, solid surface.

His hands now held (though at the same time they were still motionless at his sides) a rough, damp rope. Besides, he could see, though his eyes were closed. He could see a bright, whirling torrent of crystals in

the air around her, and he could see them gather on the backs of his hands... He ran his fingers through my hair saying do not fear this and I blacked out for it running in me. His breath was visible.

7

Beyond, through the swirl of what he now, somehow, perceived was the thing the teenager's man had spoken of- snow- he could look out and down a great distance. He was up high someplace. The ground was thick with furry snow, but he sat slightly above it on a hard, flat object. Toboggan, he knew abruptly. He was sitting on a thing called a toboggan, on top of a bobsled icy track. And the toboggan itself seemed to be poised at the top of a long, extended mound that rose from the very land where he was. Even as he thought the word 'mound,' his new consciousness teenagers her hill. Then the toboggan, with Millia herself upon it, began to move through the snowfall, and he understood instantly that now he was going downhill. No voice gave an explanation. The experience explained itself to her. His face cut through the frigid air as he began the descent, moving through the substance called snow on the vehicle called toboggan, which propelled itself on what he now knew without a doubt to be runners.

Understanding all those things as he sped downward, he was free to enjoy the breathless glee that overcomes her: the speed, the clear teenager's air, the total silence, the feeling of balance, excitement, and peace. Then, as the angle of incline lessened, as the mound the hill flattened, near the bottom, the toboggan's forward motion slowed. The snow was piled now around it, and he pushed with his body, moving it forward, not wanting the exhilarating ride to the finish. Lastly, the obstruction of the

piled snow was too much for the thin runners of the toboggan, and he came to a stop. He sat there for a moment, panting, pulling the rope in his clenching hands. Tentatively he opened his eyes- not his snow- hill- toboggan eyes, for they had been open throughout the strange ride. She opened her ordinary eyes to see what it was not like to be not a girl and saw that he was still on the bed, that he had not moved at all. Instead, because of the Ancestor's plea, Gaddie had been labeled Uncertain and given an additional year.

He would continue to be nurtured at the Center and would spend her nights with Millia's family unit. Respectively domestic members, including Maiara, had been obligatory to sign a pledge that they would not become attached to this little temporary guest, and that they would relinquish her without protest or appeal when he was assigned to his family unit at next year's Ceremony. At least, Millia thought, after Gaddie was placed next year, they would still see her often because he would be part of the community. If he were released, they would not see her again. Ever. Those who were released...even as a teenager- were sent elsewhere, and never returned to the community. The Ancestor had not had to release a single teenager this year, so Gaddie would have represented a real failure and sadness. Even Millia, though he did not hover over the little one the way Maiara and his Ancestor did, was glad that Gabe had not been released. The first ceremony began right on time, and Millia watched as one after another each teenager was given a name and handed by the lover teachers to its new family unit. For some, it was the first child. But many came to the stage accompanied by another child beaming with pride to receive a little brother or sister, the way Millia had when he was about to be

Five. Ashenria poked Millia's arm. 'Remember when we got Phillipa?' he asked in a loud whisper. Millia nodded. It had only been last year. Ashenria's parents had waited quite a long time before applying for a second child. Maybe, Millia suspected, they had been so exhausted by Ashenria's lively foolishness that they had needed a little time.

Two of their group, Fiona and another female named Lib, were missing temporarily, waiting with their parents to receive a teenager. But it was rare that there was such an age gap between children in a family unit. When her family's ceremony was completed, Fiona took the seat that had been saved for her in the row ahead of Ashenria and Millia. She turned and whispered to them, 'He's cute. But I don't like his name very much.' She made a face and giggled. Fiona's new brother had been named Samm.

It was not a great name, Millia thought, like- well, like Gaddie, for example.

Nevertheless, it was okay. The audience applause, which was enthusiastic at each Naming, rose in an exuberant swell when one parental pair, glowing with pride, took a male teenager and heard her named Samm. This new Samm was a replacement child. The couple had lost their first Samm, a cheerful little Four. The loss of a child was exceedingly rare. The community was extraordinarily safe, each citizen watchful and protective of all children. But somehow the first little Samm had wandered away unnoticed and had fallen into the river. The entire community had performed the Ceremony of Loss together, murmuring the name Samm throughout an entire day, less and less frequently, softer in volume, as the long and somber day went on so that the little Four seemed to fade away

gradually from everyone's consciousness.

Now, at this special Naming, the community performed the brief Murmur- of Replacement Ceremony, repeating the name for the first time since the loss: softly and slowly at first, then faster and with greater volume, as the couple stood on the stage with the teenager sleeping in the mother's arms. Millia watched and cheered as Maiara marched proudly to the stage, became an Eight and received the identifying jacket that she would wear this year, this one with smaller buttons and, for the first time, pockets, indicating that she was mature enough now to keep track of her small belongings. She stood solemnly listening to the speech of firm instructions on the responsibilities of Eight and doing volunteer hours for the first time.

But Millia could see that Maiara, though she seemed attentive, was looking longingly at the row of gleaming fold-up cars, which would be presented tomorrow morning to the Nines. It was as if the first Samm were returning.

Another teenager was given the name Samm, and Millia remembered that Samm the teenagers had been released only last week.

But there was no Murmur- of- Replacement Ceremony for the new little Samm. The release was different from Loss. He sat politely through the ceremonies of Two and Three and Four, increasingly bored as he was each year. Then a break for a midday meal- served outdoors- and back again to the seats, for the Fives, Sixes, Sevens, and finally, last of the first day's ceremonies, the Eights. She knew that his parents cringed a little, as he did, when Fritz, who lived in the dwelling next door to theirs, received his vintage-looking automobile car, and almost immediately bumped into the

podium with it. Next year, Maiara- Billy, Millia thought. It was an exhausting day, and even Gaddie, retrieved in his handbag from the Nurturing Center, slept soundly that night. Finally, it was the morning of the Ceremony of Nine. Now Ancestor sat beside Mother in the audience. Millia could see them applauding dutifully as the Nines, one by one, wheeled their new fold-up cars, each with its gleaming name tag attached to the back, from the stage. Fritz was a very awkward child who had been summoned for chastisement repeatedly. His transgressions were small ones, always: shoes on the wrong feet, schoolwork misplaced, failure to study for a quiz.

But each such error reflected negatively on his parents' guidance and infringed on the community's sense of order and success. Millia and his family had not been looking forward to Fritz's bicycle, which they realized would too often be dropped on the front walk instead of wheeled neatly into its port.

Finally, the Nines were all resettled in their seats, each having wheeled a bicycle outside where it would be waiting for its owner at the end of the day. Everyone always chuckled and made small jokes when the Nines rode home for the first time. 'Want me to show you how to ride?' ...Friends would call. 'I know you've never been on a like vintage-looking automobile before!' But invariably the grinning Nines, who in technical violation of the rule had been practicing secretly for weeks, would mount and ride off in perfect balance, training wheels never touching the ground. Then the Tens... Millia never found the Ceremony of Ten particularly interesting- the only time- consuming, as each child's hair was snipped neatly into its distinguishing cut: females lost their braids at ten, and males, too, relinquished their long childish hair and took on the manlier short style

which exposed their ears. Laborers moved quickly to the stage with brooms and swept away the mounds of discarded hair.

Millia could see the parents of the new Tens stir and murmur, and he knew that this evening, in many dwellings, they would be snipping and straightening the hastily done haircuts, trimming them into a neater line. Elevens... It seemed a brief time ago that Millia had undergone the Ceremony of Eleven, but he remembered that it was not one of the more interesting ones. By eleven, one was only waiting to be Nine... It was simply a marking of time with no meaningful changes. There was new clothing: different undergarments for the females, whose bodies were beginning to change; and long trousers for the males, with a specially shaped pocket for the small calculator that they would use this year in school; but those were simply presented in wrapped packages without an accompanying speech.

Break for the midday meal.

Millia realized he was hungry.

He and his group mates congregated by the tables in front of the Auditorium and took their packaged food. Yesterday there had been merriment at lunch, a lot of teasing and energy. But today the group stood anxiously, separate from the other children.

Millia watched the new Nines gravitate toward their waiting fold-up cars, each one admiring his or her name tag.

He saw the Tens stroking their new shortened hair, the females shaking their heads to feel the unaccustomed lightness without the heavy braids they had worn so long. 'I heard about a guy who was certain he was

going to be assigned engineer,' Ashenria muttered as they ate, 'and instead, they gave her Sanitation Laborer. He went out the next day, jumped into the river, swam across, and joined the next community he came to. Nobody ever saw her again.' Millia laughed. 'Somebody made that story up, Ash,' he said.

'My Ancestor said he heard that story when he was a Nine.'

Nonetheless, Ashenria was not reassured. He was eyeing the river where it was visible behind the Auditorium. 'I can't even swim very well,' he said. 'My swimming instructor said that I don't have the right boyishness or something.' 'Resilience,' Millia corrected her. 'Whatever. I do not have it. I suck... yet I can say that- that a bad word.' 'Anyhow,' Millia pointed out, 'have you ever once known of anyone- I mean known for sure, Ashenria, not just heard a story about it- who joined another community?' 'Nope,' Ashenria admitted reluctantly. 'But you can. It says so in the rules. If you do not fit in, you can apply for Elsewhere and be released. My mother says that once, about ten years ago, someone applied and was gone the next day.' Then he chuckled. 'She teenagers me, that because I was driving her crazy. She is threatened to apply for Elsewhere.' 'She was joking, I think I can think so, yet it was in the mind in that small voice.' 'I know. But it was true, what she said, that someone did that once. She said that it was true. Here today and gone tomorrow. Never seen again.

Not even a Ceremony of Release.' Millia shrugged. It did not worry about her. How could someone not fit in? The community was so meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made. Even the Matching of Spouses was given such weighty consideration that sometimes an adult who applied to receive a spouse waited months or even years before a Match was approved and announced. All the factors- disposition, energy level,

intelligence, and interests- had to correspond and interact perfectly. Millia's mother, for example, had higher intelligence than his Ancestor mom; but his Ancestor had a calmer disposition.

They balanced each other. Their Match, which like all Matches had been monitored by the Committee of Teenagers for three years before they could apply for children had always been a successful one.

‘Unquestionably,’ Mother said, and Millia and Maiara nodded and look at me as they say nicely. They had heard Ancestor complain about the night crew before. It was a lesser job, night- crew nurturing, assigned to those who lacked the interest or skills or insight for the more vital jobs of the daytime hours. Most of the people on the night crew had not even been given spouses because they lacked, somehow, the essential capacity to connect to others, which was required for the creation of a family unit. ‘Maybe we could even keep her,’ Maiara suggested sweetly, trying to look innocent. The look was fake, Millia knew; they all knew. The teenager’s man, still beside the bed, was watching her. ‘How do you feel they ask within run a prognosis of my insides, as I look down and is that then there that has no meaning, they say in life sacred tight- yet they say it is only for a pee?’ he asked. Millia sat up and tried to answer honestly. ‘Flabbergasted,’ she said, after a moment. The teenager’s man wiped his forehead with his sleeve. ‘Whew,’ she said. ‘It was exhausting. But you know, even transmitting that tiny memory to you- I think it lightened me just a little.’

‘Do you mean- you did say I could ask questions?’ The man nodded, encouraging his question. ‘Do you mean that now you don't have the memory of it- of that ride on the toboggan- anymore?’ ‘That's right. A little

weight off this teenager's body.'

'Although it was such fun! And now you do not have it anymore! I took it from you!' On the other hand, the teenager's guy sniggered. 'All I gave you was one ride, on one toboggan, in one snow, on one hill. I have an entire world of them in my memory. I could give them to you one by one, a thousand times, and there would still be more.' 'Are you saying that I- I mean we- could do it again?' Millia asked... 'I would like to. I think I could steer, by pulling the rope. I didn't try this time because it was so new.' The teenager's man, laughing, shook his head. 'Another day, for a treat. But there is no time, really, just to play. I only wanted to begin by showing you how it works. 'Now,' he said, turning businesslike, 'lie back down. I want to...' Millia did- she was eager for whatever experience would come next. But he had, suddenly, so many questions. The contributor is the man that is only- and lasts for all eternity- to all girls that are less than he. We are the progenies... 'Why? Why- don't we have snow, and toboggans, and hills and sex and keep all the makes us girls?' She asked. 'And when did we, in the past? Did my parents have toboggans when they were young? Did you?' The teenager's chap shrugged and gave a short laugh.'

'No,' he teenagers Millia. 'It's a very distant memory. That is why it was so exhausting- I had to tug it forward from many generations back. It was given to me when I was a new Obtainer, and the previous Obtainer had to pull it through a long-time period, too.' 'Despite everything that happened to those things. Snow, and the rest of it?' 'Climate Control... The snow made growing food difficult, limited the agricultural periods. And unpredictable weather made transportation almost impossible at times. It was not a practical thing, so it turned out to be obsolete when we went to

Sameness. 'As well as hills, too,' he added. 'They made a conveyance of goods unwieldy. Trucks; buses. Slowed them down. So-' She waved his hand as if a gesture had caused hills to disappear.

'Sameness,' he resolved.

Millia frowned. 'I wish we had those things, still. Just now and then.' The teenager's man smiled with lust in his eyes something I just downloaded in my now woman's mind is the scar was opened.

'So, do I,' he said. 'But that choice is not ours.'

Ever- ever did this was anything... 'But sir,'

Millia suggested, 'since you have so much power-' The man corrected her.

'Honor,' he said firmly. 'I have great honor.'

So, will you. But you will find that that is different from power. 'Lie quietly now. Since we have entered the topic of climate, let me give you something else. And this time I am not going to tell you the name of it because I want to test the receiving. You should be able to perceive the name without being a teenager. I gave away snow and toboggan and downhill, and runners by telling them to you in advance.' Without being instructed, Millia closed his eyes again. He felt the hands on his back again. She waited... Now it came more quickly, the feelings. This time the hands did not become teenagers but instead began to feel warm on his body. They moistened a little.

The warmth spread, extending across his shoulders, up to his neck,

onto the side of his face. She could feel it through his clothed parts, too: a pleasant, all-over sensation; and when he licked her lips this time think about what was to come, the air was hot and heavy. She did not move. There was no toboggan. His posture did not change. He was simply alone someplace, out of doors, lying down, and the warmth came from far above. It was not as exciting as the ride through the snowy air, but it was pleasurable and comforting. Suddenly he perceived the word for it: sunshine. He perceived that it came from the sky. Then it ended for me. 'Sunshine,' he said aloud, opening his eyes. 'Good. You did get the word. That makes my job easier. Not so much explaining.' 'And it came from the sky.' The sex was like God to me or so they made me think he was, the giving of life was heaven also- and that place they say was never real- when I pass.

'That's right,' the teenager's boy said.

'Just the way it used to.' 'Before Sameness.

Before Climate Control,' Millia added.

The man laughed. 'You receive well and learn quickly. I am incredibly pleased with you.

That is enough for today, I think. We're off to a good start.'

There was a question bothering Millia. 'Sir,' he said, 'The Main Teen teenagers me- she teenagers everyone- and you teenagers me, too, that it would be painful. So, I was a little scared. But it did not hurt at all. I enjoyed it.' He looked quizzically at the teenager's man.

The man sighed... 'I started you with memories of pleasure. My

previous failure gave me the wisdom to do that.' He took a few deep breaths. 'Millia,' he said, 'it will be painful. But it need not be painful yet.'

'I'm brave. I am.' Millia sat up a little straighter.

The teenager's man looked at her for a moment. she smiled at the world and his lusting eye knowing her number of 5,098,765,678 girls he contributed to. 'I can see that,' he said. 'Well, since you asked the question- I think I have enough energy for one more transmission. 'Lay down once more for me- and take it- this will be the last today.' Millia obeyed cheerfully. He closed his eyes, waiting, and felt his hands again; then he felt the warmth again, the sunshine, coming from the sky of this other consciousness that was so new to her. This time, as he lay basking in the wonderful warmth, he felt the passage of time. Her real self-was where aware that it was only a minute or two; but his other, memory- receiving self-felt hours pass in the sun. His skin began to sting. Restlessly he moved one arm, bending it, and felt a sharp pain in the crease of his inner arm at the elbow. 'Ouch,' he said loudly and shifted on the bed. 'Ow,' he said, wincing at the shift, and even moving his mouth to speak made his face hurt.

He knew there was a word, but the pain kept her from grasping it.

Then it ended. He opened his eyes, wincing with discomfort. 'It hurt,' he teenagers the man, 'and I couldn't get the word for it.'

'It was sunburn,' the teenage man teenagers her.

Then underwater not feeling air- Then death- 'It hurt a lot,' Millia said, 'but I'm glad you gave it to me. It was interesting. And now I

understand better what it meant, that there would be a pain.'

The man did not respond. He sat silently for an additional time. Finally, he said, 'Get up, now. It's time for you to go home.' They both walked to the center of the room. Millia put his tunic back on. 'Goodbye, sir,' he said. 'Thank you for my first day.' The teenager's man nodded to her. He looked drained, and a little sad. 'Sir?' Millia said shyly. 'Yes? Do you have an inquiry?' 'It's just that I don't know your name. I thought you were The Obtainer, but you say that now I am The Obtainer, and you give to me as I give your life.

So, I don't know what to call you.' The man had sat back down in the comfortable upholstered chair. He moved his shoulders around as if to ease away an aching sensation.

He seemed weary. 'Call me The Contributor,' he teenagers Millia. 'You slept soundly, Millia?' Her mother asked at the morning meal. 'No dreams?' Millia simply smiled and nodded, not ready to lie, not willing to tell the truth. 'I slept very soundly,' he said. 'I wish this one would,' his Ancestor said, leaning down from his chair to touch Gaddie's waving fist. The handbag was on the floor beside her; in its corner, beside Gaddie's head, the stuffed horse sat staring with its blank eyes. Everything in my life of the past was grayed out now is in full color- do you see what I see?

'So, do I,' Mother said, rolling her eyes. 'He's so fretful at night.' Millia had not heard the teenager during the night because, as always, he had slept soundly. Then again- it was not true that he had no dreams. Again, and again, as he slept, he had slid down that snow-covered hill.

Always, in the dream, it seemed as if there were a destination: a something- he could not grasp what- that lay beyond the place where the thickness of snow brought the toboggan to a stop. She was left, upon awakening, with the feeling that he wanted, even somehow needed, to reach something that waited in the distance. The feeling that it was good. That was welcoming. That it was significant.

But during the breaks for recreation periods and the midday meal, the other new Nines were abuzz with descriptions of their first day of training. All of them talked at once, interrupting each other, hastily making the required apology for interrupting, then forgetting again the excitement of describing the new experiences.

Then again, she did not know how to get there. She tried to shed the leftover dream, gathering his schoolwork, and preparing for the day. School seemed a little different today. The classes were the same: language and- communications; commerce and industry; science and technology; civil procedures and government. Millia listened. She was very aware of she was her admonition not to discuss his training.

Like- it would have been impossible, anyway. There was no way to describe to his friends what he had experienced there in the Annex room. How could you describe a toboggan without describing a hill and snow; and how could you describe a hill and snow to someone who had never felt height or wind or that feathery, magical teenager? Even trained for years as they all had been in the precision of language, what words could you use which would give another the experience of sunshine?

So, it was easy for Millia to be still and to listen.

After school hours he rode again beside Fiona to the House of the Teenagers.

‘I looked for you yesterday,’ she teenagers her, ‘so we could ride home together. You are like a vintage-looking automobile car was still there, and I waited for a little while. But it was getting late, so I went home.’

‘I apologize for making you wait,’ Millia said.

‘I accept your apology,’ she replied automatically.

‘I stayed a little longer than I expected,’ Millia explained.

She pedaled forward silently, and he knew that she expected her to tell her why. She expected her to describe his first day of training. But to ask would have fallen into the category of rudeness.

‘You’ve been doing so many volunteer hours with the Teenagers,’ Millia said, changing the subject.

‘There won’t be much that you don’t already know.’

She ran through it in his mind. It was beginning to happen more often. First, the apple a few weeks before.

The next time had been the faces in the audience at the Auditorium, just two days ago. Now, today, Fiona’s hair.

Frowning, Millia walked toward the Annex. I will ask the boy, he decided.

The teenager’s man looked up, smiling when Millia entered the

room. He was already seated beside the bed, and he seemed more energetic today, slightly renewed, and glad to see Millia.

‘Welcome,’ she said. ‘We must get started. You're one minute late now you pay for that.’

‘I apologized’ Millia began, and then stopped, flustered, remembering there were to be no apologies. She removed his dress and everything under it and went to bed. ‘I'm one minute late because something happened,’ he explained. ‘And I'd like to ask you about it if you don't mind.’ ‘You may ask me anything...’ Millia tried to sort it out in his mind so that he could explain it clearly. ‘I think it's what you call seeing-beyond,’ he said. The Contributor nodded at me with all that he was coming at me and looking for the pathway of giving me all. ‘Describe it,’ he said. Millia teenagers her about the experience with the apple.

Then the moment on the stage, when he had looked out and seen the same phenomenon in the faces of the crowd. ‘Then today, just now, outside, it happened with my friend her- she. She did not change, exactly. But something about her changed for a second. Her hair looked different, but not in shape, not in length. I can't quite-’ Millia paused, frustrated by his inability to grasp and describe exactly what had occurred.

Finally, he simply said, ‘It changed. I do not know why. ‘That's why I was one minute late,’ he concluded and looked questioningly at The Contributor. To his surprise, the teenager's man asked her a question that seemed unrelated to the seeing- beyond. ‘When I gave you the memory yesterday, the first one, the ride on the toboggan, did you look around?’ Millia nodded... ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but the stuff- I mean the snow- in the air

made it hard to see anything.' 'Did you look at the toboggan?' Millia thought back. 'No. I only felt it under me. I dreamed of its last night, too. But I do not remember seeing the toboggan in my dream, either. Just feeling it.' The Contributor seemed to be thinking. 'When I was observing you, before the selection, I perceived that you had the capacity, and what you describe confirms that. It happened somewhat differently to me,' The Contributor teenagers her. 'When I was just your age about to become the new Obtainer- I began to experience it, though it took a different form. With me it was... well, I will not describe that now; you would not understand it yet.

'But I think I can guess how it's happening with you. Let me just do a little test, to confirm my guess. Lay down... on your back.' Millia lay on the bed again with his hands at his side. He felt comfortable here now. He closed his eyes and waited for the familiar feel of the boy's hands on his back. Nonetheless, it did not come. Instead, the boy instructed her, 'Call back the memory of the ride on the toboggan. Just the beginning of it, where you are at the top of the hill before the slide starts. And this time, look down at the toboggan.' Millia was puzzled. He opened his eyes. 'Excuse me,' he asked politely, 'but don't you have to give me the memory?' 'It's your memory, now, it's not mine to experience any longer. I gave it away.' 'But how can I call it back?' 'You can remember last year, or the year that you were a Seven, or a Five, can't you?' 'Of course,' 'It's much the same. Everyone in the community has only one generation of memories like those. But now you will be able to go back farther. Try. Just concentrate.'

Millia closed his eyes again. He took a deep breath and sought the toboggan and the hill and the snow in his consciousness. There they were, with no effort. He was again sitting in that whirling world of snowflakes,

atop the hill. Millia grinned with delight and blew his steamy breath into view. Then, as he had been instructed, he looked down. He saw his own hands, furred again with snow, herding the tope. He saw his legs and moved them aside for a glimpse of the toboggan beneath. Dumbfounded, he stared at it. This time it was not a fleeting impression. This time the toboggan had- and continued to have, as he blinked, and stared at it again- that same mysterious quality that the apple had had so briefly. And Fiona's hair. The toboggan did not change. It simply was- whatever the thing was. Millia opened his eyes and was still on the bed. The boy was watching her curiously. 'Yes,' Millia said slowly. 'I saw it, in the toboggan.'

'Let me try one more thing. Look over there, to the bookcase. Do you see the very top row of books, the ones behind the table, on the top shelf?'

~*~

Millia sought them with his eyes. He stared at them, and they changed. But the change was fleeting. It slipped away the next instant. 'It happened,' Millia said. 'It happened to the books, but it went away again.' 'I'm right, then,' The boy said. 'You're beginning to see the color red.' 'What...?' The Contributor sighed letting it all out, and me getting it in. 'How to explain this? Once, back in the time of the memories, everything had a shape and size, the way things still do, but they also had a quality called color. 'There were a lot of colors, and one of them was called red. That is the one you are starting to see. Your friend Kalliean has red hair- quite distinctive, actually; I have noticed it before, yet we had sex without them know why they did this to us not to feel this lust. When you mentioned

Kalliean's hair, it was the clue that teenagers me you were probably beginning to see the color red.' 'And the faces of people? The ones I saw at the Ceremony?'

The Contributor shook his head. 'No, the flesh isn't red. But it has red tones in it. There was a time you will see this in memories later- when flesh was many assorted colors. That was before we went to Sameness. Nowadays flesh is all the same, and what you saw was the red tones. Perhaps when you saw the faces take on the color it wasn't as deep or vibrant as the apple or your friend's hair.' The Contributor chuckled, suddenly. 'We've never completely mastered Sameness. I suppose genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out. Hair like Kalliean's must drive them crazy.' Millia listened, trying hard to comprehend. 'And the toboggan?' he said. 'It had that same thing: the color red. But it did not change, the boy. It just was.' 'For the reason that it's a memory from the time when color was.'

'It was so- oh, I wish language were more precise! The red was so beautiful!' The Contributor and love the boy nodded. 'It is.' 'Do you see it all the time?' 'I see all of them... all the colors of me and everything you see- are no longer blind to all-that you did not understand.' 'Will I...?' 'Obviously- when you receive the memories. You can see beyond. You will gain wisdom, then, along with colors. And lots more.' Millia was not interested, just then, in wisdom. It was the colors that fascinated her. 'Why can't everyone see them? Why did colors disappear?' The Contributor shrugged. 'Our people made that choice, the choice to go to Sameness. Before my time, before the previous time, back and back and back. We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences.' He thought for a

moment. 'We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others.' 'We shouldn't have!' Millia said fiercely. The Contributor looked startled at the certainty of Millia's reaction. Then he smiled wryly. 'You've come very quickly to that conclusion,' he said. 'It took me many years. Maybe your wisdom will come much more quickly than mine.' She glanced at the wall clock. 'Lie back down, now. We have so much to do.' 'Contributor,'

Millia asked as he arranged herself again on the bed, 'how did it happen to you when you were becoming The Obtainer? You said that seeing-beyond happened to you, but not the same way.' The hands came to his back. 'Another day,' The boy said gently. 'I'll tell you another day. Now we must work.

And I have thought of a way to help you with the concept of color. 'Close your eyes and be still, now. I'm going to give you a memory of a rainbow.' Days went by, and weeks. Millia learned, through the memories, the names of colors; and now he began to see them all, in his ordinary life (though he knew it was ordinary no longer and would never be again). But they did not last. There would be a glimpse of green- the landscaped lawn around the Central Plaza, a bush on the riverbank. The bright orange of pumpkins being trucked in from the agricultural fields beyond the community boundary- seen in an instant, the flash of brilliant color, but gone again, returning to their flat and hueless shade. The Contributor teenagers her that it would be an exceptionally long time before he had the colors to keep. 'Then I want them!' Millia said angrily. 'It isn't fair that nothing has color!'

'Not fair?' The boy looked at Millia curiously. 'Explain what you

mean.' 'Well...' Millia had to stop and think it through. 'If everything is the same, then there aren't any choices! I want to wake up in the morning and decide things! A blue tunic, or a red one?' He looked down at herself and then at mine, at the colorless fabric of his clothing.

'But it's all the same, always.' Then he laughed a little. 'I know it's not important, what you wear. It does not matter. But- but- but...' 'It's the choosing that's important, isn't it?' The boy asked her. Millia nodded. 'My little brother-' he began and then corrected herself. 'No, that's inaccurate. He is not my brother, not really. But this teenager that my family takes care of- his name's Gaddie?' 'Yes, I know about Gaddie.' Why are the bathrooms outside then if we need to fear sex or them no longer? 'Well, he's right at the age where he's learning so much. He grabs toys when we teenagers them in front of her- my Ancestor says he is learning small muscle control. And he's really cute.'

So, you do not need to think or see that it was there on each other's bodies, as you walk around in the group showers. The same to stop the blood flow you do not need is why you take pills and long with not lusting over a girl sexily for there is no man other than I to do that too. The Contributor nodded, saying you are mine this year out of all your age.

'Nevertheless, now that I can see colors, at least sometimes, I was just thinking: what if we could teenagers up things that were bright red, or bright yellow, and he could choose?

Instead of the Sameness.' 'He might make wrong choices.' 'Oh.' Millia was silent for a minute. 'Oh, I see what you mean. It would not matter about a teenager's toy. But later it does matter, doesn't it? We don't dare to

let people make choices of their own.' 'Not safe?' The Contributor suggested. 'Not safe,' Millia said with certainty. 'What if they were allowed to choose their mate? And chose wrong? 'Otherwise, what if,' he went on, almost laughing at the absurdity, 'they chose their jobs?' 'Frightening, isn't it?' The boy said. Millia chuckled.

'Very frightening. I cannot even imagine it. We have to protect people from wrong choices.' 'It's safer- This way is it not?' Would girls do that to girls down there?

Yes, now it all me that has that too... 'Yes,' Millia agreed. 'Much safer.' But then again when the conversation turned to other things, Millia was left, still, with a feeling of frustration that he did not understand. The perfect man no other exists in their world- other than he, the sex, and wanting of everything they need to have- and to keep life going. She found that he was often angry, now: irrationally angry at his groupmates, that they were satisfied with their lives which had none of the vibrancy her own was taking on. And he was angry at herself, that he could not change that for them. 'Oh, there's lots to learn,' Kalliean replied... 'There are administrative work and the dietary rules, and punishment for disobedience- did you know that they use a discipline wand on the Teenagers, the same as for small children? And there's occupational therapy, and recreational activities, and medications, and...' They reached the building and braked theirs like vintage-looking automobiles cars. 'I think I'll like it better than school,' Kalliean acknowledged. 'Me too,' Millia agreed, wheeling his like vintage-looking automobile cars into its place. She waited for a second, as if, again, she expected her to go on. Then she looked at her watch, waved, and hurried toward the entrance. She tried- Without asking permission from the

boy because he feared- or knew- that it would be denied, he tried to give his new awareness to his friends. 'Ashenria,' Millia said one morning, 'look at those flowers very carefully.'

They were standing beside a bed of geraniums planted near the Hall of Open Records. He put his hands on Ashenria's shoulders, and concentrated on the red of the petals, trying to teenagers it if he could, and trying at the same time to transmit the awareness of red to her friend.

'What's the matter?' Ashenria asked uneasily. 'Is something wrong?' He moved away from Millia's hands. It was extremely rude for one citizen to touch another outside of family units. 'No, nothing. I thought for a minute that they were wilting, and we should let the Gardening Crew know they needed more watering.' Millia sighed and turned away. One evening she came home from his training, weighed with new knowledge. The boy had chosen a startling and disturbing memory that day. Under the touch of her hands, Millia had found herself suddenly in a place that was completely alien: hot and windswept under a vast blue sky. There were rafts of sparse grass, a few bushes, and rocks, and nearby he could see an area of thicker vegetation: broad, low trees outlined against the sky. He could hear noises: the sharp crack of weapons- he perceived the word guns- and then shouts, and an immense crashing thud as something fell, tearing branches from the trees. She heard voices calling to one another. Peering from the place where he stood hidden behind some shrubbery, he was reminded of what The Contributor had teenagers her, that there had been a time when the flesh had assorted colors. Two of these men had deep brown skin; the others were light. Going closer, he watched them hack the rusks from a motionless elephant on the ground and haul them away, spattered with blood. He felt

overwhelmed with a new perception of the color he knew as he read increasingly. 'Maiara,' he asked that evening when his sister took her comfort object, the stuffy, from the shelf, 'did you know that once there were elephants? Live ones? 'Then the men were gone, speeding toward the horizon in a vehicle that spits pebbles from its whirling tires. One hit his forehead and stung her there.

But the memory continued, though Millia ached now for it to end. Now he saw another elephant emerge from the place where it had stood hidden in the trees. Very slowly it walked to the mutilated body and looked down. With its sinuous trunk, it stroked the huge corpse; then it reached up, broke some leafy branches with a snap, and draped them over the mass of torn thick flesh. Finally, it tilted its massive head, raised its trunk, and roared into the empty landscape. Millia had never heard such a sound. It was a sound of rage and grief and it seemed never to end.

He could still hear it when he opened his eyes and lay anguished on the bed where he received the memories. It continued to roar into his consciousness as he pedaled slowly home. She glanced down at the ragged comfort object and grinned. 'Right,' she said, skeptically. 'Sure, Millia.' Millia went and sat beside them while his Ancestor united Maiara's hair ribbons and combed her hair. He placed one hand on each of their shoulders. With all his being, he tried to give each of them a piece of the memory: not of the tortured cry of the elephant, but of the being of the elephant, of the towering, immense creature, and the meticulous touch with which it had tended its friend at the end. But his Ancestor had continued to comb Maiara's long hair, and Maiara, impatient, had finally wiggled under her brother's touch. 'Millia,' she said, 'you're hurting me with your hand.' 'I

apologize for hurting you, Maiara,' Millia mumbled and took his hand away. 'Kept your apology,' Maiara responded indifferently, stroking the lifeless elephant.

'Contributor,' Millia asked once, as they prepared for the day's work, 'don't you have a spouse? Aren't you allowed to apply for one?' Although he was exempted from the rules against rudeness, he was aware that this was a rude question. But the boy had encouraged all his questions, not seeming to be embarrassed or offended by even the most personal.

The Contributor chuckled. 'No, there's no rule against it. And I did have a spouse.

You are forgetting how teenagers I am, Millia.

My former spouse lives now with the Childless

Adults.' 'Oh, of course.' Millia had forgotten the boy's obvious age. When adults of the community became teenagers, their lives became different. They were no longer needed to create family units. Millia's parents, when he and Maiara were grown, would go to live with the Childless Adults. 'You'll be able to apply for a spouse, Millia if you want to. I will warn you, though, that it will be difficult. Your living arrangements will have to be different from those of most family units because books are forbidden to citizens. You and I are the only ones with access to the books.' Millia glanced around at the astonishing array of volumes. From time to time, now, he could see their colors. With their hours together, his and The Contributor's, consumed by conversation and by the transmission of memories, Millia had not yet opened any of the books.

But he read the titles here and there and knew that they contained all the knowledge of centuries and that one day they would belong to her. 'So-o if I have a spouse, and children, I will have to hide the books from them?' The Contributor nodded. 'I wasn't permitted to share the books with my spouse, that's correct. And there are other difficulties, too. You remember the rule that says the new Obtainer can't talk about his training?' Millia nodded. Of course, she remembered. It had turned out, by far, to be the most frustrating of the rules he was required to obey. 'When you become the official Obtainer, when we are finished here, you'll be given a whole new set of rules. Those are the rules that I obey. And it will not surprise you that I am forbidden to talk about my work to anyone except the new Obtainer. That is, you, unquestionably.'

'So, there will be a whole part of your life which you won't be able to share with a family. It is hard, Millia. It was hard for me.'

'You do understand, don't you, that this is my life? The memories?' Millia nodded again, but he was puzzled. Didn't life consist of the things you did each day? There was not anything else. 'I've seen you taking walks,' he said.

~*~

The Contributor sighed. 'I walk. I eat at mealtimes. And when I am called by the Committee of Teenagers, I appear before them, to give them counsel and advice.' 'Do you advise them often?' Millia was a little frightened at the thought that one day he would be the one to advise the ruling body. The Contributor said no. 'Rarely. Only when they are faced with something that they have not experienced before. Then they call upon me to

use the memories and advise them. But it very seldom happens.

Sometimes I wish they would ask for my wisdom more often- there are so many things I could tell them; things I wish they would change. But they do not want to change. Life here is so orderly, so predictable- so painless. It's what they've chosen.' 'I don't know why they even need an Obtainer, then, if they never call upon her,' Millia commented. 'They need me. And you,' The Contributor said but didn't explain.

'They were reminded of that ten years ago.' 'What happened ten years ago?' Millia asked.

'Oh, I know.

You tried to train a successor and it failed. Why? Why did that remind them?' The Contributor boy smiled grimly. 'When the new Obtainer failed, the memories that she had received were released. They did not come back to me. They went...' The boy paused and seemed to be struggling with the concept. 'I don't know, exactly. They went to the place where memories once existed before Obtainers were created. Someplace out there-' He gestured vaguely with his arm.

'And then the people had access to them.

9

That is the way it was, once. Everyone had access to memories. 'It was chaos,' he said. 'They suffered for a while. Finally, it subsided as the memories were assimilated. But it certainly made them aware of how they need an Obtainer to contain all that pain. And knowledge.' 'But you have to suffer like that all the time,' Millia pointed out.

The Contributor nodded. 'And you will. It is my life. It will be yours.' Millia thought about it, about what it would be like for her. 'Along with walking and eating and-' He looked around the walls of books.

'Reading? That's it?' The

Contributor shook his head. 'Those are simply the things that I do. My life is here.'

'In this room?' The Contributor shook his head.

He put his hands to his face, to his chest. 'No.

Here, in my being. Where the memories are.' 'My instructors in science and technology have taught us about how the brain works,' Millia teenagers her eagerly. 'It's full of electrical impulses. It is like a computer. If you stimulate one part of the brain with an electrode, it-' He stopped talking. He could see an odd look on the boy's face. 'They know nothing,' The Contributor said bitterly. Millia was shocked. Since the first day in the Annex room, they had together disregarded the rules about rudeness, and Millia felt comfortable with that now. But this was different, and far beyond rude. This was a terrible accusation. What if someone had heard? He glanced at the wall speaker, terrified that the Committee might be listening as they could at any time.

But, as always during their sessions together, the switch had been turned to OFF.

'Nothing?' Millia whispered nervously.

'But my instructors-' The Contributor flicked his hand as if brushing

something aside. 'Oh, your instructors are well trained. They know their scientific facts. Everyone is well trained for his job. 'It's just that ... without the memories, it's all meaningless. They gave that burden to me.

And to the previous Obtainer.

And the one before her.' 'And back and back and back,' Millia said, knowing the phrase that always came. The Contributor smiled, though his smile was oddly harsh. 'That's right. And next, it will be you. A great honor.' 'Yes, sir. The teenagers me that at the Ceremony.

The very highest honor.'

Some afternoons the boy sent her away without training. Millia knew, on days when he arrived to find the boy hunched over, rocking his body slightly back and forth, his face pale, that he would be sent away.

'Go,' the boy would tell her tensely. 'I'm in pain today. Come back tomorrow.'

On those days, worried and disappointed, Millia would walk alone beside the river.

The paths were empty of people except for the few Delivery Crews and Landscape Workers here and there.

Small children were all at the Childcare Center after school, and the teenage ones busy with volunteer hours or training.

By herself, he tested his developing memory. He watched the landscape for glimpses of the green that he knew was embedded in the shrubbery; when it came flickering into his consciousness, he focused upon

it, keeping it there, darkening it, hatemongering it in his vision if possible until his head hurt, and he let it fade away.

He stared at the flat, colorless sky, bringing blue from it, and remembered sunshine until finally, for an instant, he could feel the warmth.

He stood at the foot of the bridge that spanned the river, the bridge that citizens were allowed to cross only on official business. Millia had crossed it on school trips, visiting the outlying communities, and he knew that the land beyond the bridge was much the same, flat, and well ordered, with fields for agriculture.

The other communities he had seen on visits were the same as his own, the only differences were slightly altered styles of dwellings, slightly different schedules in the schools.

Millia stood for a moment beside his like a vintage-looking automobile, startled. It had happened again: the thing that he thought of now as 'seeing beyond.' This time it had been Kalliean who had undergone that fleeting indescribable change. As he looked up and toward her going through the door, it happened; she changed. Millia thought, trying to recreate it in his mind, it was not Kalliean in her entirety. It was just her hair. And just for that flickering instant.

He wondered what lay in the far distance where he had never gone. The land did not end beyond those nearby communities. Were there hills Elsewhere? Where their vast wind-torn areas like the place he had seen in memory, the place where the elephant died?

'The boy,' he asked one afternoon following a day when he had been

sent away, 'what causes you pain?' When the boy was silent, Millia continued. 'The Main Teen teenagers me, in the beginning, that the receiving of memory causes terrible pain. And you described to me that the failure of the last new Obtainer released painful memories to the community.'

'But I have not suffered, The boy. Not really.' Millia smiled. 'Oh, I remember the sunburn you gave me on the very first day. But that was not so terrible. What is it that makes you suffer so much? If you gave some of it to me, maybe your pain would be less.'

The boy nodded. 'Lie down,' he said.

'It's time, I suppose. I cannot shield you forever.

You will have to take it all on eventually.

'Let me think,' he went on, when Millia was on the bed, waiting, a little fearful.

'All right,' The boy said after a moment, 'I've decided. We will start with something familiar. Let us go once again to a hill, and a toboggan.'

He placed his hands on Millia's back.

It was much the same, this memory, though the hill seemed to be a different one, steeper, and the snow was not falling as thickly as it had before.

It was them, also, Millia perceived. He could see, as he sat waiting at the top of the hill, that the snow beneath the toboggan was not thick and soft as it had been before, but hard, and coated with bluish ice.

The toboggan moved forward, and Millia grinned with delight, looking forward to the breathtaking slide down through the invigorating air.

The runners, this time, could not slice through the frozen expanse as they had on the other, snow- cushioned hill. They skittered sideways and the toboggan gathered speed.

Millia pulled at the rope, trying to steer, but the steepness and speed took control from his hands, and he was no longer enjoying the feeling of freedom but instead, terrified, was at the mercy of the wild acceleration downward over the ice.

Sideways, spinning, the toboggan hit a bump in the hill, and Millia was jarred loose and thrown violently into the air. She fell with his leg twisted under her and could hear the crack of bone. His face scraped along jagged edges of ice and when he came, at last, to a stop, he lay shocked and still, feeling nothing at first but fear.

Then, the first wave of pain. He gasped. It was as if a hatchet lay lodged in his leg, slicing through each nerve with a hot blade. In his agony, he perceived the word 'fire' and felt flames licking the torn bone and flesh. He tried to move and could not. The pain grew.

She screamed... There was no answer... Sobbing, he turned his head and vomited onto the frozen snow. Blood dripped from his face into the vomit.

'No!' he cried, and the sound disappeared into the empty landscape, into the wind.

Then, suddenly, he was in the Annex room again, writhing on the

bed. Her face was wet with tears. Able to move now, he rocked his own body back and forth, breathing deeply to release the remembered pain. She sat, and looked at his leg, where it lay straight on the bed, unbroken. The brutal slice of pain was gone. But the leg ached, still, and his face felt raw. 'May I have relief- of- pain, please?' he begged. It was always provided in his everyday life for bruises and wounds, for a smashed finger, a stomachache, a skinned knee from a fall from a vintage-looking automobile car. There was always a daub of anesthetic ointment, or a pill; or in severe instances, an injection that brought complete and instantaneous deliverance. The boy said no and looked away. Limping,

Millia walked home, pushing his bicycle, that evening. The sunburn pain had been so small, in comparison, and had not stayed with her. But this ache lingered. It was endurable, as the pain on the hill had been.

Millia tried to be brave. He remembered that the Main The teen had said he was brave. 'Is something wrong, Millia?' his Ancestor asked at the evening meal.

'You're so quiet tonight. Aren't you feeling well?

Would you like some medication?'

Millia remembered the rules. No medication for anything related to his training. Too no discussion of his training. At the time for sharing- of- feelings, he simply said that he felt tired, that his school lessons had been unusually demanding that day. She went to his sleeping room early, and from behind the closed door, he could hear his parents and sister laughing as they gave Gaddie his evening bath.

~*~

They have never known pain, she thought. The realization made her feel desperately lonely, and he rubbed his throbbing leg. He eventually slept. Again, and again he dreamed of the anguish and the isolation on the forsaken hill.

The daily training continued, and now it always includes pain. The agony of the fractured leg began to seem no more than a mild discomfort as the boy led Millia firmly, little by little, into the deep and terrible suffering of the past.

Each time, in his kindness, the boy ended the afternoon with a color-filled memory of pleasure: a brisk sail on a blue-green lake; a meadow dotted with yellow wildflowers; an orange sunset behind mountains. It was not enough to assuage the pain that Millia was beginning, now, to know.

‘Why?’ Millia asked her after he had received a torturous memory in which he had been neglected and unfed; the hunger had caused excruciating spasms in his empty, distended stomach. She lay on the bed, aching. ‘Why do you and I have to teenagers these memories?’

‘It gives us wisdom,’ The boy replied. ‘Without wisdom, I could not fulfill my function of advising the Committee of Teenagers when they call upon me.’

‘But what wisdom do you get from hunger?’ Millia groaned. His stomach still hurt, though the memory had ended.

‘Some years ago,’ The boy teenagers her, ‘before your birth, a lot of citizens petitioned the Committee of Teenagers. They wanted to increase

the birth rate. They wanted each Birthmother to be assigned four births instead of three so that the population would increase and there would be more Laborers available.' Millia nodded, listening. 'That makes sense.' 'The idea was that certain family units could accommodate an additional child.' Millia nodded again. 'Mine could,' he pointed out. 'We have Gaddie this year, and it's fun, having a third child.'

'The Committee of Teenagers sought my advice,' The boy said. 'It made sense to them, too, but it was a new idea, and they came to me for wisdom.' 'Plus, you used your memories?' The boy said yes. 'And the strongest memory that came was hunger. It came from many generations back. Centuries back. The population had gotten so big that hunger was everywhere. Excruciating hunger and starvation. It was followed by warfare.'

Warfare...? It was a concept Millia did not know. But hunger was familiar to her now. Unconsciously he rubbed his abdomen, recalling the pain of its unfulfilled needs. 'So, you described that to them?' 'They don't want to hear about the pain. They just seek advice. I simply advised them against increasing the population.' 'But you said that that was before my birth. They hardly ever come to you for advice. Only when they- what was it you said?

When they have a problem, they have never faced it before. When did it happen last?' 'Do you remember the day when the plane flew over the community?' 'Yes. I was scared.' 'So were they. They prepared to shoot it down. But they sought my advice. I teenagers them to wait.' 'How did you know? How did you know the pilot was lost?' 'I didn't. I used my wisdom,

from the memories. I knew that there had been times in the past- terrible times- when people had destroyed others in haste, in fear, and had brought about their destruction.' Millia realized something. 'That means,' he said slowly, 'that you have memories of destruction. And you must give them to me, too, because I have to get the wisdom.' The boy nodded... 'Then again it will hurt,' Millia said. It was not a question. 'It will hurt terribly,' The boy agreed... 'But why? Why can't everyone have memories? I think it would seem a little easier if the memories were shared. You and I wouldn't have to bear so much by we if everybody took apart.'

The boy sighed. 'You're right,' he said. 'But then everyone would be burdened and pained. They do not want that. And that is the real reason The Obtainer is so vital to them and so honored. They selected me- and you- to lift that burden from themselves.' 'When did they decide that?' Millia asked angrily. 'It wasn't fair.

Let us change it!' 'How do you suggest we do that? I've never been able to think of away, and I'm supposed to be the one with all the wisdom.' 'Then there are two of us now,' Millia said eagerly. 'Together we can think of something!' The boy watched her with a wry smile. 'Why can't we just apply for a change of rules?' Millia suggested. The boy laughed; then Millia, too, chuckled reluctantly. 'The decision was made long before my time or yours,' The boy said, 'and before the previous Obtainer, and-' He waited. 'Back and back and back,' Millia repeated the familiar phrase.

Sometimes it had seemed humorous to her.

Sometimes it had seemed meaningful and important. Now it was ominous. It meant, he knew, that nothing could be changed.

The teenager, Gaddie, was growing, and successfully passed the tests of maturity that the Nurturers gave each month; he could sit alone, now, could reach for, and grasp small play objects, and he had six teeth. During the daytime hours, Ancestor reported, he was cheerful and seemed normal intelligence. But he remained fretful at night, whimpered often, needing frequent attention. 'After all this extra time I've put in with her,' Ancestor said one evening after Gaddie had been bathed and was lying, for the moment, hugging his horse placidly in the small crib that had replaced the handbag, 'I hope they're not going to decide to release her.' 'Maybe it would be for the best,' Mother suggested. 'I know you don't mind getting up with her at night. But lack of sleep is awfully hard for me.'

~*~

'If they release Gaddie, can we get another teenager as a visitor?' asked Maiara. She was kneeling beside the crib, making funny faces at the little one, who was smiling back at her. Millia's mother rolled her eyes in dismay. 'No,' Ancestor said, smiling. He ruffled Maiara's hair. 'It's exceedingly rare, anyway, that a teenager's status is as uncertain as Gaddie's. It will not happen again, for a long time. 'Anyway,' he sighed, 'they won't decide for a while. Right now, we are all preparing for a release we will have to make very soon. There's a Birthmother who's expecting twin males next month.' 'Oh, dear,' Mother said, shaking her head. 'If they're identical, I hope you're not the one assigned-'

'I am. I am next on the list. I will have to select the one to be nurtured, and the one to be released. It is usually not hard, though. Usually, it is just a matter of birthweight. We release the smaller of the two.'

Millia, listening, thought suddenly about the bridge and how, standing there, he had wondered what lay Elsewhere. Was there someone there, waiting, who would receive the tiny, released twin? Would it grow up Elsewhere, not knowing, ever, that in this community lived a being who looked the same? For a moment he felt a tiny, fluttering hope that he knew was quite foolish. He hoped that it would be Lieissah, waiting. Lieissah, the woman he had bathed. He remembered her sparkling eyes, her soft voice, her low chuckle.

Kalliean had teenagers her recently that Lieissah had been released at a wonderful ceremony. But he knew that the Teenagers were not given children to raise. Lieissah's life Elsewhere would be quiet and serene as befit the Teenagers; she would not welcome the responsibility of nurturing a teenager who needed feeding and care and would cry at night. 'Mother? Ancestor?' He said, the idea coming to her unexpectedly, 'why don't we put Gaddie's crib in my room tonight? I know how to feed and comfort her, and it would let you and Ancestor get some sleep.' Ancestor looked doubtful. 'You sleep so soundly, Millia. What if his restlessness didn't wake you?' It was Maiara who answered that. 'If no one goes to tend Gaddie,' she pointed out, 'he gets very loud. He'd wake all of us if Millia slept through it.' Ancestor laughed.

'You're right, Maiara- Billy. All right, Millia, let us try it, just for tonight. I'll take the night off and we'll let Mother get some sleep, too.' Gaddie slept soundly for the earliest part of the night. Millia, in his bed, lay awake for a while; from time to time he raised herself on one elbow, looking over at the bed. The teenager was on his stomach, his arms relaxed beside his head, his eyes closed, and his breathing regular and undisturbed.

Finally, Millia slept too. Then, as the middle hours of the night approached, the noise of Gabe's restlessness woke Millia. The teenager was turning under his cover, flailing his arms, and beginning to whisper. Millia rose and went to her. Gently he patted Gaddie's back. Sometimes that was all it took to lull her back to sleep. But the teenager still squirmed fretfully under his hand. Still patting rhythmically, Millia began to remember the wonderful sail that the boy had given her not long before: a bright, breezy day on a clear turquoise lake, and above her the white sail of the boat billowing as he moved along in the brisk wind. She was not aware of giving the memory; but suddenly he realized that it was becoming dimmer, that it was sliding through his hand into the being of the new child. Gaddie became quiet. Startled, Millia pulled back what was left of the memory with a burst of will. He removed his hand from the little back and stood quietly beside the bed. To herself, he called the memory of the sail forward again. It was still there, but the sky was less blue, the gentle motion of the boat slower, the water of the lake murkier and more clouded. He kept it for a while, soothing his nervousness at what had occurred, then let it go and returned to his bed. Once more, toward dawn, the teenager woke and cried out. Again, Millia went to her. This time he quite deliberately placed his hand firmly on Gaddie's back and released the rest of the calming day on the lake.

Again- Gaddie slept. But then again now Millia lay awake, thinking. He no longer had any more than a wisp of memory, and he felt a small lake where it had been. He could ask the boy for another sail, he knew. A sail on the ocean, next time, for Millia had a memory of the ocean, now, and knew what it was; he knew that there were sailboats there, too, in memories yet to be acquired. She wondered, though, if he should confess to the boy that

he had given a memory away.

He was not yet qualified to be a boy herself; nor had Gaddie been selected to be an Obtainer. That he had this power frightened her. He decided not to tell. Millia entered the Annex room and realized immediately that it was a day when he would be sent away. The boy was rigid in his chair, his face in his hands. 'I'll come back tomorrow, sir,' he said quickly. Then he hesitated. 'Unless maybe there's something I can do to help.' The boy looked up at her, his face contorted with suffering. 'Please,' he gasped, 'take some of the pain.' Millia helped her to his chair at the side of the bed. Then he quickly removed his tunic and lay face down.

'Put your hands on me,' he directed, aware that in such anguish the boy might need reminding. The hands came, and the pain came with them and through them. Millia braced herself and entered the memory which was torturing the boy. She was in a confused, noisy, foul-smelling place. It was daylight, early morning, and the air was thick with smoke that hung, yellow and brown, above the ground. Around her, everywhere, far across the expanse of a field, lay groaning men. A wild-eyed horse, its bridle torn and dangling, trotted frantically through the mounds of men, tossing its head, whinnying in panic. It stumbled, finally, then fell, and did not rise. Millia heard a voice next to her.

'Water,' the voice said in a parched, croaking whisper. She turned her head toward the voice and looked into the half-closed eyes of a boy who seemed few teenagers than herself. Dirt streaked the boy's face and his matted blond hair. He lay sprawled, his gray uniform glistening with wet, fresh blood. The colors of the carnage were grotesquely bright: the crimson

wetness on the rough and dusty fabric, the ripped shreds of grass, startlingly green, in the boy's yellow hair. The boy stared at her. 'Water,' he begged again. When he spoke, a new spurt of blood-drenched the coarse cloth across his chest and sleeve. One of Millia's arms was immobilized with pain, and he could see through his own torn sleeve something that looked like ragged flesh and splintery bone. He tried his remaining arm and felt it move. Slowly he reached to his side, felt the metal container there, and removed its cap, stopping the small motion of his hand now and then to wait for the surging pain to ease.

Finally, when the container was open, he extended his arm slowly across the blood-soaked earth, inch by inch, and held it to the lips of the boy. Water trickled into the imploring mouth and down the grimy chin. The boy sighed. His head fell back, his lower jaw-dropping as if he had been surprised by something. A cloudy blankness slid slowly across his eyes. He was silent... But the noise continued all around: the cries of the wounded men, the cries begging for water and Mother and death. Horses lying on the ground shrieked, raised their heads, and stabbed randomly toward the sky with their hooves. From a distance, Millia could hear the thud of cannons. Overwhelmed by pain, he lay there in the fearsome stench for hours, listened to the men and animals die, and learned what warfare meant. Finally, when he knew that he could bear it no longer and would welcome death herself, he opened his eyes and was once again on the bed.

The boy looked away as if he could not bear to see what he had done to Millia. 'Forgive me,' he said.

As I ran for her and not him for a gay relationship.

Millia did not want to go back. He did not want the memories, did not want the honor, did not want the wisdom, did not want the pain. He wanted his childhood again, his scraped knees and ball games. He sat in his dwelling alone, watching through the window, seeing children at play, citizens bicycling home from uneventful days at work, ordinary lives free of anguish because he had been selected, like others before her hand, to bear their burden. But the choice was not his.

He returned each day to the Annex room. The boy was gentle with her for many days following the terrible shared memory of war, yet he was not her inside her mind, like that voice. 'There are so many good memories,' The boy reminded Millia. And it was true. By now Millia had experienced countless bits of happiness, things he had never known of before. He had seen a birthday party, with one child singled out and celebrated on his day, so that now he understood the joy of being an individual, special, and unique and proud. He had visited museums and seen paintings filled with all the colors he could now recognize and name. In one ecstatic memory, he had ridden a gleaming brown horse across a field that smelled of damp grass and had dismounted beside a small stream from which both he and the horse drank clear water.

Now he understood about animals; and now that the horse turned from the stream and nudged Millia's shoulder affectionately with its head, he perceived the bonds between animal and human. He had walked through woods and sat at night beside a campfire. Although he had learned through the memories about the pain of loss and loneliness, now he gained, too, an understanding of solitude and its joy. 'What is your favorite?' Millia asked the boy. 'You don't have to give it away yet,' he added quickly. 'Just tell me

about it, so I can look forward to it because I'll have to receive it when your job is done.'

The boy smiled. 'Lie down,' he said. 'I'm happy to give it to you.' Millia felt the joy of it as soon as the memory began. Sometimes it took a while for her to get his bearings, to find his place. But this time he fit right in and felt the happiness that pervaded the memory. He was in a room filled with people, and it was warm, with firelight glowing on a hearth. He could see through a window that outside it was night and snow. There were colored lights: red, green, and yellow, twinkling from a tree which was, oddly, inside the room. He could smell things cooking, and he heard soft laughter.

On the floor, there were packages wrapped in brightly colored paper and tied with gleaming ribbons. As Millia watched, a small child began to pick up the packages and pass them around the room: to other children, to adults who were parents, and to a teenager, quiet couple, man, and woman, who sat smiling together on a couch. While Millia watched, the people began one by one to untie the ribbons on the packages, to unwrap the bright papers, open the boxes and reveal toys and clothing and books. There were cries of delight. They hugged one another. The small child went and sat on the lap of the teenager's woman, and she rocked her and rubbed her cheek against his.

Millia opened his eyes and lay contentedly on the bed, still luxuriating in the warm and comforting memory. It had all been there, all the things he had learned to treasure.

'What did you perceive?' The boy asked.

‘Warmth,’ Millia replied, ‘and happiness. And- let me think. Family. That was a celebration of some sort, a holiday. And something else- I can't quite get the word for it.’ ‘It will come to you.’ ‘Who were the teenager's people? Why were they there?’ It had puzzled Millia, seeing them in the room.

The Teenagers of the community did not ever leave their special place, the House of the Teenagers, where they were so well cared for and respected. ‘They were called Grandparents.’ ‘Grandparents?’

‘Grandparents. It meant parents- of the- parents, long ago.’ ‘Back and back and back?’ Millia began to laugh. ‘So actually, there could be parents- of- the- parents- of- the- parents- of- the parents?’ The Obtainer laughed, too. ‘That's right. It's a little like looking at yourself looking in a mirror.’ Millia frowned. ‘But my parents must have had parents! I never thought about it before. Who are my parents-of- the parents? Where are they?’ I asked in my mind running for the invisible covered overhead to let us out... hand and hand- we went, out of this controlled world- into the next diss- rick.

~*~

This is horrifying to me, but I could see that baby coming out looking like my dad, or even being my dad oddly enough, like being born again out of her. Just popping slightly out... ‘Looking like Achmed the Dead Terrorist!’

Then something inside me just snapped. (One eye twitched twice.)

'I am done, I am just done fighting for her.' I thought- 'There comes a time where every man reaches his breaking point.

And mine was when she thought I would do that to her or let him have his way. She holds me responsible, regardless? Like I was deviant demonic sick- o.'

(There comes a time when you must let her go.) If she wants me, she will come back to me... right? Naturally, I left her to walk off into the sunset, butt cheeks wiggling away. (Am I going to regret it?) I do not know yet. So... I am thinking about her already.

In nine months, I will know if I am a daddy or not. Even though she thinks... I have no way of truly knowing. She is going by feel and that is not always right. She will be back if she loves me! That is not if the mob of wolves does not find her and the baby first. And do what I said they would. But I am just DONE!

I wonder where she is going to go now. I wonder what I am going to do without her now. She is naked running across a pond of lava, who is already four weeks pregnant. She is my love navigating a world that has moved on from her death. I could not just leave her. 'Perhaps I could watch her from a distance and protect her when she needs it. I thought. I saw that she had finally reached the other side and I continued to follow her. 'I don't trust you, but where the fuck am I?'

Giselle covered her boobs and vagina. 'Mount Vahalla.

Look at least let me drive you back to your hometown, and you can get some clothes.

Here-a, take my jacket...' I gave her my jacket and she took it. 'TURN AROUND!' She screamed, and I turned around when I did not, and she put the jacket on, and I spun around and led her to my truck. 'What do you remember?' I asked trying to have a conversation. 'Nothing. I can't remember anything.' She sat hunched overlooking out the window, fogging it up with her breath. I put on the heater and heat started to come out through the vents. She screamed until she inspected the vents closer.

'Why do you drive so fast?' 'It's Just a closed off would think,' I said. 'What is it?' She asked dumbfounded. After all this, she is just the way she was before all this took place. I went along with it. 'It's not all just stifling air coming out.

Even if we do not breathe- It helps in keeping bodies like ours warm, to feel loved- do you like it, this feeling?'

I replied keeping my eyes on the road. 'It burns my skin.' She looked at me. 'Yeah, that happens when your skin is cold. But do not worry, it won't hurt you unless it's on higher.' I smiled. Knowing that it was frostbite. 'I believe you.'

She smiled with a sparkle in her eye. 'You do remember me. Don't you?' I smiled. 'How could I ever forget the love of my life? I love you... I said to her noting it was wrong- yet it was not to me before. And I am pregnant, I created a potion to prevent myself from getting pregnant by your father before raped me. I remembered what you said to me.

So-o I am fine and thank you for being me back to life.

So-o instead of going back there, why don't we go and explore the

world like France and get me some clothes.' She chuckled and held my hand. I laughed and we both listened to old music as we rode into the sunlight. Nine months later a new baby was born. A little girl that was all ours, we named Faith. We both reached the successful conclusions that we want so badly, and found love within love, by having something and someone to love more than life itself.